



*Steve was forever running late and tonight was no exception to that rule. So when he got to Neal's house to meet up with him and Ross they were already gone but it was odd. Steve sat in his car in the driveway and from where he sat he could see that the front door was what exactly? Ajar? Left open? Steve didn't know for certain but knowing Neal he could have left in a hurry and the door didn't close all the way or something so Steve being the good neighbor sort got out of his car and he walked to the front door.*

*Steve barely had his hand on the doorknob when the door was yanked open from the inside and he was grabbed. Whoever it was was strong as they pulled him inside and then the door was shut behind him. Besides noticing right off the bat that he was in serious trouble he also noticed that the living room had been ransacked. The lamp was left on, which Neal always did when he went out, and it was lying sideways on the floor and that gave off just enough light for Steve to see that the living room was in shambles. The guy that held him had to be at least 6'6 or 6'7 because the way that he held him, with his arm around Steve's neck had his feet almost off of the floor, Steve was standing on his tip-toes.*

*Steve was no match for this guy and he knew it all he could do was hang there, like a cat dangling from a tree branch. Steve knows now that he walked in on....something. A robbery gone bad? A burglary gone bad? Steve had his hands up and on the guys arm trying to pull it away from his neck if he didn't die from suffocation all the guy had to do was to snap his neck like a twig.*

*"Who in the fuck are you!!!" The man asks angrily.*

*Steve swallows. "I...I should be asking you the same thing!! Where's Neal?"*

*"Not here stupid! But you are and that is bad for you!!!"*

*"Who's that?"*

*Another voice said from the staircase and Steve and the guy who was holding him looked. The guy on the staircase wasn't as big as this guy but he was wearing a black ski mask that matched his all black outfit. The guy holding him was slightly distracted by the arrival of this guy and Steve took that opportunity to grab him by one of his fingers and he bent it back slightly and then he bit that hand....hard enough to draw blood. The guy screamed and he dropped Steve like a hot rock and when Steve's feet hit the floor he took off like a rabbit. Steve was counting on the fact that these two guys didn't know Neal's house as well as he did so Steve ran and he headed for the den. Steve ran down the hall to the den and when he got there he shut the door behind him and he grabbed a chair and he shoved it under the doorknob.*

*Even though the guy was big he was able to recover quickly and when he did he chased after Steve. Steve was in the den making his way around the desk to the other door that was there and as he did so he could hear the door almost being torn off of its hinges by that guy, who by now was really pissed.*

***“You little prick!!! When I get my hands on you I’m going to kill you!!!”***

***Steve grabbed the doorknob and he flung the door open and he slammed it shut behind him just as the door to the den exploded. Even in the dark Steve flew down the stairs and he ran around the side of the house to the driveway where his car sat and when he got to his car he was going to get in, locked all the fucking doors and drive off and find the police station and then he....but as got closer to the car he had to slam on his brakes, stop, slow down because coming around the driver’s side of the car was the other guy who had been standing on the stairs but this time he was holding a gun and it was a big gun, a shotgun actually.***

***Steve’s feet slipped on the gravel of the driveway and even before his butt hit the ground the big guy who he had bit was right there behind him. Steve didn’t know how somebody that big could move so fast but he had and when he reached down and grabbed Steve by the collar of his jacket Steve thought his spine would snap in two.***

***“Sorry mother fucker bit me!!!!” The guy said as he once again had Steve around his neck. “Let me kill him!!!” Steve closes his eyes as he felt the guys hands move into a more suitable killing position on his head.***

***“No we can use him. As leverage....”***

***Steve opens his eyes and he looks at him.***

***“Fuck you and your leverage.” Steve says.***

***The guy holding the gun wags his finger at Steve. “Now, now that isn’t nice considering the spot that you find yourself in. Nice car.” The man says as he runs his finger over the trunk. “I wonder if the trunk is as nice as the rest of the car, give me your keys.”***

***Steve laughs. “If you want them get them yourself!!!”***

***“Alright man if you want to do it that way we can....”***

***In the next moment the guy was in his space holding the shotgun pointed up towards the sky as he used his free hand to check the pocket’s of Steve’s jeans.***

***“Let’s see, I feel a wallet in that back pocket. Oh nothing in that one. Let’s try the ones in front.” He says as he moves in hand around in front. “Nothing in the left one or the right....oh wait that’s you isn’t it?” The man say says as he moves his hand down to Steve’s crotch. “You like that don’t you?”***

***“You aren’t my type. Why don’t you check in my left jacket pocket?” Steve says through clenched teeth.***

***“You aren’t my type either but I could get used to you.” He says as he moves his hand up and into the left pocket of his jacket and when he feels the keys he pulls them out. “Now that I think about it that long hair of yours is quite a turn-on.” The man says as he reaches up and he grabs a handful of it.***

***“Don’t....touch....me!”***

*Steve says as he puts both of his hands on the guy's arm that is around his neck then he raises his legs up to his chest and he kicks out as hard as he can making direct contact with the guy's chest that is standing in front of him causing him to fall backwards and as he does so the hand that is holding the shotgun pulls the trigger and the shotgun discharges. Luckily it fires up into the sky.*

*Steve had watched enough cop shows in his life to know that if they put him in that trunk he was as good as dead. So he figured that he had nothing to lose so he was going to do all that he could to get a few good licks in of his own. And there seem to be no better place to start than with this guy who got his rocks off by feeling him up so he fought back with the only tools that he had in his arsenal, his legs and feet. When he made contact it felt good, it felt damn good, and it didn't even bother him when the shotgun went off because he knew that the neighbors heard it and that blast caused all the dogs within a two mile radius to start barking. As always and Steve was finding this out there was always a price to pay and the price was that the guy who was holding him was shaking him like a rag doll.*

*"Do it!!!" The guy says from the ground as he holds his chest. "Holy shit! Just....do....it! Now!"*

*Steve felt the guy behind him and his strength and he knew that there was nothing that he could do about it just pray that it was quick and painless. Steve felt the guy's hands move into different positions on his head and neck and he was waiting, waiting on that audible snap but instead he felt his energy leave his body. His arms and legs were flaying back and forth, back and forth until finally that ability to move was slowed and then it ceased all together. His eyes were getting heavier and heavier and the last words he heard before the blackness set in was....*

*"Holy shit! Just....do....it! Now!"*

*Then nothing. Just that sweet oblivion known as darkness and Steve was....gone.*

*Hours later Neal pulled into his driveway and when he stopped he reached over and he turned off the radio.*

*"Too bad Steve didn't show he missed a great concert." Ross says.*

*"Yeah man and considering it was his idea...." Neal says but doesn't finish because Ross reaches out and he puts his hand on Neal's arm.*

*"Neal what's that in the driveway?" Ross says.*

*"Where?" Neal asks.*

*"Right there. Turn the headlights back on."*

*Neal does this and they both see something shiny reflecting back at them from the driveway and then they get out.*

*"It's a watch." Ross says as he picks it up.*

*"That's Steve's watch." Neal says as he takes it from Ross.*

*Ross makes a face. "What's it doing here?"*

*"I don't know....wait. What's that over there?" Neal says as he points a little farther up the drive.*

*As they get closer to it Ross stops Neal. "Neal those are...."*

*"....Shotgun shells...." Neal says as he bends over to pick them up but Ross stops him.*

*"No don't the police....Neal you didn't leave your front door open did you?" Ross asks.*

*"No of course not."*

*"Well it's open." Ross points out then before he knows it Neal has gone back to his car and he unlocks the trunk and he rummages around for a few minutes.*

*"Neal what are you doing?" Ross whispers.*

*"Looking for a weapon...." Neal says.*

*"A weapon....? Neal are you crazy?"*

*"....There it is...." Neal says as he pulls the tire iron from the trunk.*

*"Neal we should go and call the police...."*

*"Steve might be in there and the police showing up might not be good....stay behind me."*

*Neal says as he gestures and Ross falls in behind him as they crept up to the front door Neal holding the tire iron up and out in front of him. When they get to the front door Neal using the tire iron pushes it open further and when the hinges make a squeaky protest they wince. They wait a few minutes and when nothing happens Neal peeks around the corner.*

*"Fuck!!!"*

*"What is it?" Ross asks.*

*Neal goes into the house. "Neal you shouldn't go in there!"*

*"I think they're gone Ross...." Neal says.*

*Ross goes in. "Holy shit!" He exclaims as he looks around. "Neal man I think you've been robbed!!"*

*"Ross take a look upstairs and see if anything is missing. You know the gold records, that sort of thing, and see if Steve is up there."*

*Ross runs up the stairs and while Ross does that Neal takes a look downstairs. He checks all the places where the important stuff is kept. After about twenty minutes Ross comes back downstairs.*

*"Neal man all your recording equipment is still there and the gold records but Neal they completely tore apart your guitars." Ross says.*

*“What?” Neal says.*

*“Yeah all of them. The acoustic ones were smashed and the electric ones were taken apart, no sign of Steve. Did they take anything from down here?” Ross asks.*

*“No, no the safe wasn’t touched. Why didn’t they just take the guitars, I don’t understand....”*

*“I don’t either....” Ross says.*

*“Steve was definitely here though. How else would his watch get here?” Neal says.*

*“You aren’t thinking that he interrupted....?” Ross asks.*

*“Ross I don’t know I hope not....but I think it’s time we call the police.” Neal says as he goes over to the phone and just as his hand reaches out to pick up the receiver the phone rings and for some reason just that simple, everyday sound, scares them.*

*Neal looks at Ross. “Maybe it’s Steve....” Ross says.*

*Neal takes a deep breath as he answers it.*

*“Hello?”*

*“Well it’s about time you made it back home....”*

*“Who is this?” Neal asks as Ross comes over to the phone.*

*The voice laughs. “Let’s just say that I was the one that rearranged your house.”*

*“What do you want?” Neal asks.*

*“What I didn’t find in your house.”*

*“Which was what exactly?” Neal asks.*

*“A guitar.”*

*“A guitar? I have a lot of guitars here....” Neal says.*

*“Not the one that I need.”*

*“Which one?” Neal asks.*

*“The one with the Italian flag on it.”*

*“That one wasn’t here.” Neal says.*

*“No shit. I want that guitar.”*

*“Well I don’t have it you fucker!”*

*Silence. “Hello!” Neal says then the next thing he hears is a dial tone. “Son-of-a-bitch!”*

*"He wants that guitar? Why?" Ross asks.*

*"I don't know! It's not special...." Neal says as he walks away with his hands on his head then the phone rings again.*

*Ross is the closest so he answers it. "Hello?"*

*Silence. "Who in the hell is this?"*

*Ross holds the phone out to Neal. "It's for you."*

*Neal takes the phone from Ross. "Yeah what!"*

*"There is somebody here that wants to talk to you."*

*Silence then... "Neal."*

*"Steve?!" Neal says then Ross runs over and he puts his ear closer to the phone.*

*"Neal he wants that guitar."*

*"Steve, Steve man are you okay?" Neal asks.*

*"For now." Steve replies.*

*"What does that mean?" Neal asks.*

*"He wants that guitar Neal and if he doesn't get it....he'll make me disappear....forever."*

*"Jesus Steve! You know I don't have that guitar anymore!!"*

*"You better find it...." Steve says.*

*"Yeah Neal you better find it or your friend here....dies. You have until Sunday." The other voice now says.*

*"Wait no!" Neal says.*

*Silence. "Did you just say no?"*

*"No I mean yes! I need more time than that! It's complicated!"*

*"How complicated?"*

*"Jesus god almighty! Our fan club had a contest and the prize was that guitar, autographed by me! I need time to find it and then...."*

*Silence and then once again dial tone. "No!!!!" Neal yells at the phone. "No!" Neal continues to yell as he slams the receiver repeatedly down onto the phone.*

*"Neal they won't...." Ross says. "They won't will they, I mean it's just a guitar, they won't really, right?"*

*Neal shakes his head. "He sounded serious...."*

*Again the phone rang and Neal dived for it. "Hello?"*

*"You have a week from Sunday. Understand?"*

*"Yes I understand." Neal says.*

*"No cops. You can have only one other person to help you. Got it?"*

*"Yes." Neal says.*

*"You have a pager right?"*

*"Yeah."*

*"555-1974?"*

*"Yeah that's the number." Neal says.*

*"I'll page you at this same time every night and you'll have 20 minutes to get to a phone. Got it?"*

*"What if it takes longer than 20 minutes....?" Neal asks.*

*"For your friend's sake you better hope it doesn't. He wants to say one last thing to you....keep it short." They hear him say to Steve.*

*"Neal...."*

*"Yeah Steve?"*

*"Listen to me Neal. Time is precious. Do you understand Neal? Precious time!! Get it! Precious....time! Neal are you listening to me???!!"*

*"Yeah Steve I hear you....Precious time."*

*"Rescue me Neal.....Rescue...."*

*Silence then that damnable dial tone that says the conversation is finished and in Steve's case....possibility forever.*

*"We have to go to the office right now." Neal says as he hangs up the phone.*

*"Precious time? What do you think he meant Neal?"*

*"I don't know....Precious Time is from Departure....leave....go....time is short....one of those or all of the above....but I do know Steve was trying to tell us something and Ross you know what else?"*

*Ross shakes his head.*

*"I heard something in his voice that I have never heard before. Fear. Let's go."*

*The first thing Steve felt was being slapped awake and then the painful sensation of duct tape being ripped off of his mouth.*

*“Oh sorry did that hurt?” The voice says.*

*Steve runs his tongue over his dried lips. “Bastard.”*

*“Now that isn’t nice especially since I have some water for you.” The voice says.*

*Steve is now more awake and he realizes that he can’t move his arms. “What? What’s going on? I can’t move....I can’t see...”*

*“You’re ducted taped to a chair. Don’t you know that it has a thousand and one uses?”*

*Steve turns his head to the right because now it sounds like his voice is coming from that direction.*

*“Here you go here’s some water.” The voice says as he grabs Steve by the back of his head and Steve tries to turn his head spilling some of it. “Hey watch it man!”*

*“I can’t see! How do I know that’s water....?” Steve says.*

*In the next instance the duct tape that was covering his eyes was ripped off and Steve let out a yelp of pain then he held his breath as he looked down. He blinked once then twice then he raised his head to see that same person that was at Neal’s standing in front of him, straddling one of his legs and holding a Styrofoam cup, and smirking wearing that same black ski mask.*

*“I know what you’re thinking and you can’t....see.” He points down to Steve’s legs which are also duct taped to the legs of the chair. “So I guess that renders you....impotent? No?” He smiles.*

*“You just wait....” Steve says.*

*“So do you want some water or not? Oh I forgot you don’t trust me.” He says then he takes a drink and he ends up drinking the whole cup. “Satisfied?”*

*“Alright.” Steve says.*

*The guy backs up and Steve watches as he goes back over to the water cooler to the right of him then Steve takes a quick look around. It is an office. Pure and simple. An old office. An old metal desk and chair, the one that he is sitting in, an old beat up file cabinet and an even older floor lamp that is in the corner and the office is devoid of anything that says where he might be that is until he sees....*

*....The guy back in front of him straddling his leg as he holds the cup up to his lips and Steve didn’t realize just how thirsty he was until he took that first sip then the cup was empty.*

*“Want more?” He asks and Steve nods his head and once again the guy moves away from him and back to the water cooler. Across the room was an old calendar, part of it ripped away from*

*the wall as if in some attempt to disguise where they were but Steve could make it out and he filed it away for future reference. Once again the guy was back with another cup of water.*

*“Better?” He asks.*

*Steve nods his head. “Do you always wear that?” Steve asks referring to the ski mask.*

*“No I wasn’t planning on it but since you’re here yeah I do. See you were unplanned. That one fly in the ointment. Technically you....” He points at Steve. “....shouldn’t be here.”*

*“Then let me go man. Put me back in my car and drive me somewhere, anywhere. I don’t care. You and your gorilla friend can even keep my car. Drop me off and I’ll walk....”*

*“What about the cops?”*

*“What about them? I haven’t seen your faces and I don’t know where I am. So far no harm no foul. You haven’t hurt me....”*

*“Not yet....” He says seriously as he looks at Steve.*

*“Yeah not yet. So let me go and I swear I won’t tell the cops anything! I don’t even know what you want....”*

*“A guitar.”*

*“A....a guitar?” Steve laughs. “Is that it? Holy shit Neal had a lot of guitars at his....”*

*“Ah but he didn’t have the one I’m looking for...”*

*“Which one....?” Steve asks.*

*“The one with the Italian flag on it....” Steve looks down which the other person picks up on. “....You know where it’s at don’t you?”*

*Steve shakes his head then the person reaches out and he grabs Steve by his hair and he raises his head back up. “You’re lying!!”*

*“No! No I’m not! I don’t know....”*

*“Liar!!!” He shoves Steve’s head back as he glances at the clock on the wall then he takes a few steps back from him and Steve watches as he goes over to the desk and he sits down on the corner and he picks up the telephone receiver. “Let’s see if your friend is at home yet.” He says as he dials Neal’s number.*

*“Hello?” Neal says.*

*“Well it’s about time you made it back home....”*

*“Who is this?” Neal asks.*

*The voice laughs. “Let’s just say that I was the one that rearranged your house.”*

*“What do you want?” Neal asks.*

*“What I didn’t find in your house.”*

*“Which was what exactly?” Neal asks.*

*“A guitar.”*

*“A guitar? I have a lot of guitars here....” Neal says.*

*“Not the one that I need.”*

*“Which one?” Neal asks.*

*“The one with the Italian flag on it.”*

*“That one wasn’t here.” Neal says.*

*“No shit. I want that guitar.”*

*“Well I don’t have it you fucker!” Neal spats back.*

*He takes the phone away from his ear and he looks at it and they can hear Neal on the other end.*

*“Hello!” Then he hangs up.*

*“I must say that your friend is rude.” He says to Steve.*

*“Oh then I suppose this is your version of polite?” Steve says back to him.*

*He doesn’t say anything he just dials Neal’s number again and back at Neal’s house Ross answers this time.*

*“Hello?” Ross says.*

*Silence. “Who in the hell is this?” He asks surprised.*

*In the next moment Neal is back on the phone. “Yeah what!”*

*“There is somebody here that wants to talk to you.”*

*He gets up off of the desk and he carries the phone over to Steve and he puts the phone up to Steve’s ear and mouth....silence then... “Neal.” Steve says.*

*“Steve?!” Neal says.*

*“Neal he wants that guitar.”*

*“Steve, Steve man are you okay?” Neal asks.*

*“For now.” Steve replies as he looks up at him.*

*“What does that mean?” Neal asks.*

*"He wants that guitar Neal and if he doesn't get it....he'll make me disappear....forever."*

*"Jesus Steve! You know I don't have that guitar anymore!!"*

*"You better find it...." Steve says as he looks up at him again.*

*"Yeah Neal you better find it or your friend here....dies. You have until Sunday." He says as he moves the phone away from Steve.*

*"Wait no!" Neal says.*

*That last statement of Neal's renders him silent for just a moment. "Did you just say no?"*

*"No I mean yes! I need more time than that! It's complicated!" Neal says.*

*"How complicated?"*

*"Jesus god almighty! Our fan club had a contest and the prize was that guitar, autographed by me! I need time to find it and then...."*

*Once again he is silent then he hangs up the phone and as he counts to ten Steve watches this silently. Then once again he dials Neal's number.*

*"Hello?" Neal says as he answers quickly.*

*"You have a week from Sunday. Understand?"*

*"Yes I understand." Neal says.*

*"No cops. You can have only one other person to help you. Got it?"*

*"Yes." Neal says.*

*"You have a pager right?"*

*"Yeah." Neal says.*

*"555-1974?"*

*"Yeah that's the number." Neal says.*

*"I'll page you at this same time every night and you'll have 20 minutes to get to a phone. Got it?"*

*"What if it takes longer than 20 minutes....?" Neal asks.*

*"For your friend's sake you better hope it doesn't." He looks at Steve as he says this.*

*"Let me say one last thing....please." Steve says.*

*He wants to say one last thing to you....keep it short." He says to Neal then he puts the phone back up to Steve's head.*

*“Neal....”*

*“Yeah Steve?”*

*“Listen to me Neal. Time is precious. Do you understand Neal? Precious time!! Get it! Precious....time! Neal are you listening to me???!?”*

*“Yeah Steve I hear you....Precious time.”*

*“Rescue me Neal.....Rescue....”*

*He took the phone away from Steve’s head and he hung it back up then he placed it back on the desk. After that Steve was blindfolded again and when his gorilla of a partner got there Steve was cut away from the chair and he hoisted Steve up and over his shoulder like Steve was a big doll. Steve could tell that they were now outside because the night air was chilly and brisk as he was taken somewhere else. He knew it had to be on the same property as the office because they didn’t drive but for Steve it felt like they were moving in circles and then they came to a stop.*

*He could hear a sound but he wasn’t sure what it was then he heard what sounded like a garage door opening. Under his blindfold he could see a sudden spark of light then he felt himself being lifted off of the shoulder and stood on his feet with his face shoved up against cold bricks and a knee in his back.*

*“Hear that....?” The man asks him that has a knee in his back then Steve hears the distinct sound of a shotgun being cocked close by his head.*

*“Yeah.” Steve answers.*

*“You’re be a good boy so I can untie you, got it? That shotgun has a hair trigger.”*

*“No problem.” Steve answers.*

*First his blindfold is removed and Steve opens his eyes to a brick wall and Steve glances down to see a concrete floor. Next the duct tape is cut away that holds his hands bound behind his back and now Steve is finally free.*

*“Face that wall until we leave.” The big man says.*

*Steve glances over his shoulder to see them backing up and when they get outside the door is pulled down and slammed shut and that is when Steve turns away from the wall and he runs the short distance to the door and from the other side he hears the lock put into place. He looks and he sees that there are no handles on this side and then he turns to see what he is left with.*

*The light that was peeking under his blindfold was from a lantern that was in the corner and in the other corner was a mattress and there was a pillow and a few blankets. In the other corner by the door was a bucket and a roll of toilet paper and that was to be his bathroom and a jug full of water Steve thinks and another jug that was empty. High up in the wall was a vent and that was his source of fresh air and at this time of night that fresh air was cold. Steve immediately grabbed the bucket and he turned it upside down underneath the vent and he*

*stood up on it and he could just look out if he stood up on his tippy-toes but all he saw was darkness.*

*Steve suddenly felt tired, drained of all of his energy as he slowly took a step back down off of the bucket. He goes over to the mattress and he sits with his back to the corner and he clutches his pillow to his chest his knees drawn up. A blanket is close by so he grabs that as well and he covers himself and now that he is tired his toughness and resolve melts away. He leans his head back with his eyes closed and he takes a deep breath and then another and he finds himself starting to cry.*

*Tears of frustration mingled with fear. Fear of the unknown. Now he has to trust. Trust the people that he has come to rely on over the years. His band mates. His brothers in music. Neal. He has to trust....Neal. This enclosed place was small. Maybe too small for his liking. Emotional overload and pretty soon his brain for the night shut down as he felt himself drifting. Sleep. Sleep was a good way to lose oneself and he could go away from here and no one could stop him. No one. That locked door was no longer a hindrance to him so as his tears gave way to sleep he dreamed that he was at home....where he was always safe and sound.*

*Even though it was late they had keys and Neal unlocked the door as they went into the building and they didn't get far when they were stopped.*

*"Stop and put your hands up."*

*Neal and Ross stop dead in their tracks with their hands in the air.*

*"What are you two doing in here?" Stan asks as he points his gun in their direction. Stan was an off-duty cop moonlighting by guarding the Journey's offices and grounds and the guys thought that he had always done a good job, maybe too good of a job. Like now.*

*"Stan it's me Neal and Ross."*

*Stan shines his flashlight at them and the guys wince.*

*"Oh sorry." Stan says as he puts his gun back in his holster. "It's late what are you two guys doing here?"*

*They drop their hands. "Paperwork...." Ross says.*

*"Yeah you know. It's never ending. We were just going up to the fan's club office." Neal says.*

*"And this couldn't wait until tomorrow or even Monday?" Stan asks.*

*Ross points to the illuminated clock on the wall and he laughs. "Technically it is tomorrow. It's after midnight."*

*"Yeah right." Neal says as he glances at Ross. "Anyway we have to go out of town later today so we had to do this now."*

*"Sure. Just lock the door back behind you, okay fellows?" Stan asks.*

*"Oh yeah sure...." Neal says.*

*“No problem...” Ross says.*

*Neal and Ross head upstairs to the office as Stan continues on his rounds. “Holy Mary! I forgot all about Stan! He just about scared the shit out of me!” Ross says.*

*“You and me both. We’re not doing anything illegal you know. We do belong here.” Neal says as he unlocks the office then they go in and Neal turns on the overhead light. Ross goes to one desk as Neal goes to the filing cabinet.*

*“Now I wonder what they would file it under.” Neal says out loud.*

*“Try the letter ‘C’ for contests and in that folder will be a subfolder with your name on it.” Ross says.*

*Neal looks over at Ross. “And you know this how?”*

*“One day I was bored so I came up here to see what the girls were doing and they were filing. Just look.”*

*Neal thumbs through the files until he gets to one that is labeled “Contests” and he looks in that folder until he finds a folder with his name on it. “Bingo!” Neal says happily as he pulls the file out and he carries it over to the desk.*

*“Say thank you Ross.” Ross says.*

*“Thank you Ross.” Neal repeats.*

*“Your welcome.” Ross says.*

*Neal opens the folder. “Let’s see. Okay here we go and the winner is....Ross pack your bags and tell everybody to go to hell.... we’re going to Texas.”*

### SATURDAY

*Steve forgot where he was for just a moment in time. You know the feeling when you go on vacation or go someplace outside of your comfort zone and you wake up and you have no clue as to where you are. You think you are at home when in actuality you are away from home and so it was with Steve. Oh sure it had happened to him on tour as it did the other guys and that is when you find out that wishing does not make it so. When Steve opened his eyes he first saw that white washed brick and then he realized that he had slept in the same position all night and his neck and back were stiff. And then he remembered where he was. He closed his eyes again as he rubbed the back of his neck and he stretched his legs out. So it wasn’t some strange nightmare. It was real and he was here.*

*“Neal. Please hurry man. Hurry. If you fuck this up and they kill me I swear to god I will come back and haunt you!” Steve says out loud.*

*Sitting there he hears the lock on the outside being undone then the door rises slowly and he sees two sets of legs and when it rises even more he sees his capturers and the bigger one is holding the shotgun and the smaller guy is coming in slowly carrying a big brown grocery sack. This happened quickly and Steve didn’t even have time to react let alone move. Steve was too stiff from the night before and he didn’t think he could move fast even if he*

wanted to so all he could do was sit there and watch. Steve winces and he brings his arm up to shield his eyes from the sun.

*“Good morning.” He says.*

*“What’s good about it?” Steve asks.*

*“Breakfast for one thing.” He says.*

*“How can you be so fucking cheery?” Steve asks.*

*“How can you be so fucking uncheery?” He asks back.*

*Steve laughs. “Just look around. You don’t need that shotgun, it makes me nervous.”*

*“It’s our insurance policy. I brought you breakfast.” He says again.*

*“Yeah so.” Steve replies not impressed.*

*“Oh I forgot.” The guy says as he puts the sack on the ground then he gets down on one knee next to it. He pulls out a Styrofoam container and he shows it to Steve then he opens it and right until that moment Steve didn’t realize that he was hungry, close to starving actually but he wasn’t going to let them see that. Steve could smell the food from here and he watches as he opens it.*

*“Let’s see what we have here. Bacon, sausage, scrambled eggs, toast. We didn’t know what you liked so we got you a variety. In this other one are pancakes and a cup of coffee.” He takes out a slice of bacon and he eats it. “See it’s not poisoned or anything like that. I told you you’re our....”*

*“....Leverage. I know.” Steve says.*

*“Then why don’t you relax and enjoy this.” He says.*

*Steve laughs again. “You’re not serious. You kidnap me and throw me in this little box and you expect me to relax and enjoy it! You’re a fucking lunatic.”*

*“Yeah but I’m a fucking lunatic that’s taking care of you so don’t bite the hand that feels you and I can hear your stomach growling from here.” He sits the food on the ground then he stands and he starts to back away.*

*“Don’t leave me in here all day by myself, okay? Give me a newspaper or magazines or a book something to read! A radio! A radio to listen to! I don’t want to be in here all day!” Steve looks up at him and Steve told himself that he wouldn’t do this, that he couldn’t do this not here with these people, not ever but now he hears himself doing it. Begging. “Please. I’ll do whatever you want. Anything. Just don’t....I couldn’t stand it. Anything is better than being cooped up in here all day. Please.”*

*The guy listens. Standing there with his arms crossed over his chest he looks back at his partner and the guy shakes his head no.*

*“We’ll think about it okay? Now eat before it gets cold.” The guy says as he continues to back up and out the door which closes and then locks once again. After they are gone Steve throws*

*the pillow and blanket aside and he crawls as fast as he can over to the food and not even using the plastic ware that came with it he eats it with his fingers. When he has eaten everything and drank the cup of coffee he sits back on the mattress and that is when he hears the door open again, just enough to slide a newspaper and a few magazines under then the door is shut quickly again and locked.*

*Steve crawls over to them. "Thanks." Steve yells to the door.*

*They slept and ate on the plane because it could be the only sleep or meal they might get today. Once they landed at Houston Hobby Airport Neal rented a car as Ross waited on their luggage and they headed to the address of the guitar contest winner with Ross operating as co-pilot and navigator.*

*"You know when you said we were going to Texas I thought you meant metropolitan Dallas or even Fort Worth not 'Texas Chainsaw Massacre Texas'." Ross says as he does the quotation marks with his fingers. "This is just about out in the boonies man."*

*"Yeah I think we found that 'Bummed Fucked Egypt' everybody talks about." Neal says.*

*Following the directions that were given to them at the gas station they found the house where their contest winner lived and it was a ways out of the city and off a country road and it was a big, sprawling ranch house with the emphasis on ranch because that is what it was. A lot of land and a lot of horses that ran with them as they drove up the drive. Far off behind the house they could see a barn and a pick-up truck coming back to the house.*

*"Wow! This is quite a spread!" Ross says.*

*"Listen to you, 'quite a spread' trying to talk like a Texan now?" Neal asks.*

*"Well you know when in Rome...." Ross says.*

*Neal drives up the circular drive and he parks in front of the house and as they get out the pick-up they saw drives around and it stops at the fence. An older man gets out wearing overalls and a cowboy hat and as he approaches the fence he takes a piece of straw out of his mouth.*

*"Can I help you boys with something?" He asks with a heavy Texan twang.*

*"Ah yes sir we're looking for Glenn Wheeler." Neal says as he takes a slip of paper out of his pocket as they walk over to the fence.*

*"I'm Glenn Wheeler." He says.*

*Neal and Ross look at each other. "You're Glenn Wheeler?" Ross asks.*

*"Yes siree Bob! What can I do for you boys? You aren't from that Publisher Clearing House thing are ya?"*

*Neal and Ross laugh. "No sir but we are here about a contest you won...." Neal says.*

*Mr. Wheeler looks at Neal with a blank stare. "...You know the guitar contest?" Ross offers.*

*Mr. Wheeler takes his hat off and he scratches his head. "A guitar contest? Oh....you probably want my boy his name is Glenn Wheeler Junior." He says as he puts the hat back on his head.*

*Neal and Ross smile. "Oh sure probably. Is he here by chance?" Neal asks.*

*"No siree Bob he's in Oklahoma, Ardmore to be exact."*

*"Ardmore....?" Neal exclaims.*

*"Oklahoma....?" Ross exclaims as well.*

*"Yes siree Bob he has a band and they a' traveling across the country. Country swing band and they are catching on quick! Are you boys alright? You look a little sad."*

*Neal puts the paper back in his pocket. "We were hoping sir that he would be here...."*

*"Yeah....sir we would really like to talk to him. It's important." Ross says.*

*Mr. Wheeler closes one eye as he looks at them. "Where you're boys from?"*

*"California." They say together.*

*"Well Sam Hill you certainly came a long way. Tell you what I have the tour schedule in the house why don't you two stay for lunch....?"*

*"We don't want to impose...." Neal says.*

*"No sir we don't...." Ross says.*

*"Oh it's no trouble we always have plenty, the wife and I. Since the kids left it's hard to cook for just two again. We have ice tea and fried chicken."*

*They look at each other. "Sure." With that kind of hospitality how could you turn them down? So they didn't.*

*It was almost afternoon when they door was raised up again and this time the smaller guy was holding the shotgun as the bigger guy approached Steve with a roll of duct tape.*

*"Stand up and face the wall."*

*Steve puts the magazine aside that he was reading and he stands up facing the wall. The big guy grabs his arms and he pulls them behind Steve and he duct tapes them together.*

*"Just so you know I don't like this idea, but my partner has a soft spot and most of the time that can be a bad thing....like now. If you pull any shit...."*

*"I won't I swear. I want to walk out of here not be carried out in a box."*

*"Yeah right. Come on let's go." He says as he pulls Steve by his arms and when they get outside Steve is being pulled more than he is walking and it doesn't help that the sun is blinding him. Once inside the office Steve spies the bathroom.*

*"I have to use the bathroom...."*

*They look at one another then the big guy approaches him. "Turn around." Steve does so and the duct tape is cut from his wrists. "There isn't a window so if you had that idea...." The guy says as he pushes Steve towards the bathroom.*

*"The only idea I had was using the bathroom...." Steve says as the guy shuts the door behind him.*

*A few minutes later Steve comes out and he is immediately grabbed and put into the same chair that he was in last night. The bigger guy uses duct tape to secure Steve to the chair just leaving his arms free while his chest and legs are taped to the chair. The guy pushes the chair under the desk while the smaller guy sits on the opposite side. The bigger guy turns the radio on that sits on the file cabinet.*

*"You play cards?" The smaller guy asks as he shuffles the deck.*

*"Yeah sure." Steve replies not really caring what he does just as long as he is out of that cage for a little while.*

*"Let's talk." The bigger guy says as he puts his hand on the shoulder of the smaller guy which causes him to look up.*

*The smaller guy places the cards in front of Steve. "Shuffle them while I'm gone."*

*Steve watches as he gets up and they go outside. He can't really hear what they are saying due to the radio but he can hear raised voices and the bigger guy is the louder of the two. After a few minutes the smaller guy comes back alone and then Steve hears a vehicle start up and drive off as the smaller guy sits across from him again but this time he lays the shotgun across his lap.*

*"So what are we playing?" He asks.*

*Steve shrugs. "Whatever. Hearts, Gin Rummy, I know a lot of card games."*

*"Let's try Gin Rummy."*

*Steve shuffles the cards again then he deals out ten cards apiece and the others he puts in the middle between them.*

*"So I see you changed ski masks. Red and black is definitely your color." Steve says.*

*He laughs. "Flattery will get you no where."*

*Steve shrugs. "Doesn't hurt to try."*

*"That is why I have this...." He says as he pats the shotgun in his lap.*

*"Look I grew up on my grandfather's farm and he had a shotgun so I know what they can do I'm not ignorant to that fact."*

*"Good happy to hear it."*

*"You're a bigger threat to me than I am to you...." Steve says.*

*"If only you hadn't shown up at that house." He says as he shakes his head.*

*"Bad timing." Steve says.*

*"Gin...." He says.*

*"Damn!" Steve replies.*

*The guy gathers the cards up and he reshuffles them.*

*"So is that big guy your boyfriend?" Steve asks.*

*"Why do you want to be?" He asks without missing a beat.*

*"No I'm just making conversation." Steve says.*

*"What about your friend what's his name?" The guy asks.*

*"Neal? What about him?" Steve asks as he picks up his cards.*

*"Is he your boyfriend?" He asks.*

*"No. Why?" Steve asks.*

*"Just making conversation." The guy replies as he shrugs.*

*"I love women okay?" Steve says.*

*"Fine by me man." He says. "I love women too but you know you're cute. I would do you given half a chance...."*

*"Thanks a hell of a lot." Steve says.*

*"Just an observation. But just to let you know I don't make passes at guys who are duct taped to chairs but for you I could make, you know, an exception."*

*"Lovely....Not only could I be killed but my virtue is in danger as well."*

*The guy laughs. "Virtue? You? Gin!"*

*"Damn it!" Steve says as he throws down his cards. "Is there anything else besides cards?"*

*"Yeah let me check." The guy grabs the shotgun off of his lap as he goes over to the file cabinet then he opens it and he pulls out a box and he comes back with it. "Checkers?" The guy asks.*

*"Jesus checkers. Okay I suppose." Steve says.*

*"Hey you're the one that wanted company remember?" He says. "Red or black?"*

*"I don't care." Steve says.*

*The guy puts the checkers in place on the board.*

*"So where are you from?" Steve asks.*

*"Around." He says.*

*"What's your name?" Steve asks.*

*"Don't have one." He says.*

*Steve laughs at this. "Everybody has a name."*

*"I don't" He says.*

*"I just want to know what to call you." Steve says.*

*"Or what to tell the police." He says.*

*"No I told you...."*

*"King me." He says smugly.*

*"Holy shit!!!" Steve exclaims.*

*"Hold that thought man while I use the can." He says as he gets up and he takes the shotgun with him into the bathroom as he shuts the door.*

*"Hey man don't blow your dick off with that shotgun." Steve says.*

*"Yeah man funny." He says.*

*Steve had to move quickly and luckily the bathroom was not that far away and also luckily again the bathroom door swung out and those few things were in Steve's favor as he was able to move the chair back in front of the door and as quietly as humanly possible he wedged the chair up and under the doorknob. As soon as it was fixed into place he started to take off the duct tape and he was finished with his chest when he heard the toilet flush and then surprised when the guy on the inside tried the doorknob.*

*"Hey what in the fuck is going on out there?" He asks.*

*"What do you mean?" Steve asks as he bends over and he removes the duct tape from his legs.*

*"The doors jammed!!!"*

*"Imagine that!!!" Steve says.*

*"You won't get far trust me." He says.*

*"Is that a fact?" Steve asks as he pulls the rest of the duct tape off then he stands up.*

*"You don't know what's out there!" He says again.*

*“Freedom. That’s what out there.” Steve says as he runs out of the office and down the stairs.*

*“Ah freedom of the open road.” Ross says as he drives. After they had lunch with the rancher and his wife they switched places and now Ross was behind the wheel.*

*“Jesus five hours to Ardmore.” Neal says.*

*“That was nice of Mrs. Wheeler to pack us some food for the road.”*

*“Yeah and it was even nicer of Mr. Wheeler Senior to pack some Jim Bean.” Neal says as he holds up the bottle.*

*Ross laughs. “We’re save that for when we save Steve. They were nice people. I think once we settle down in a hotel room tonight, wherever that may be; I’m going to call my mom.”*

*“Yeah me too.” Neal says as he fiddles with the radio. “Ah man I can’t find anything good.”*

*“Why don’t you break out that guitar you brought along to trade with and play us something?” Ross says.*

*“You know that is an excellent idea.” Neal says as he reaches behind the seat and he grabs the guitar and he pulls it to the front.*

*Once Steve got down the stairs he turned to the left and to the gravel driveway and when he rounded the building he saw a huge chain link gate and when he got to it, it was chained and padlocked.*

*“Shit!!” Steve exclaimed as he grabbed the chain and he rattled it. The gap in the gate wasn’t wide enough to allow him to squeeze through it and up top was razor wire. “Shit!!” So Steve turned around and ran back the way that he had come pass the office and that was when he heard the shotgun blast but that only made him run faster.*

*In the bathroom the guy grabbed the shotgun and he blew the doorknob off and half the door with it and when that happened he kicked the rest of the door down and once he was out he ran to the file cabinet.*

*Steve ran down the length of the fence and when it turned to the right so did he and in the distance he saw what made him think that his luck was changing. It was an old rusted out piece of car that had become lodged up against the fence and it was his way out because on the other side of that fence was an open field and then the highway all Steve had to do was get to it. Steve looked behind him and he didn’t see the guy so Steve kicked it into overdrive and when he got to the car he slowed just enough to get his foot up on the hood then the rest of him followed. He stepped over the non-existent windshield and onto the roof and grabbing onto the pole of the fence with one hand he vaulted cleanly over the razor wire and down onto the ground below. He rested there for just a minute then he was running, running off across the field and in the distance he saw the highway and the cars on it and that is when the hair began to stand up on the back of his neck because over the noise of the traffic they were easy to pick out....the sounds of dogs barking.*

*At that moment Steve looked behind him and he saw two of the biggest German Shepherds that he had ever seen in his life and they were coming after him. They also had jumped onto the car and the two of them had vaulted over the fence and now they were running full bore after him. He didn't know where they had come from but that didn't matter all that mattered was....survival. Near the highway was a tree, a big old oak tree and if he only could get to it, if only his legs and strength could hold out, if only....*

*Then he was hit from behind by a force that was alien to him and when he hit the ground his breath was knocked from him and one of the two dogs were on him. Lying face down he covered his head with his arms as he felt his shirt being ripped from his back, kicking, screaming and yelling for his life.*

*"Anschlag! Anschlag!" The guy yelled at the dogs and immediately they stopped. "Hergekommen! Sitzen Sie!!" And they came to him and they sat looking up to him for more instructions. Then he approached Steve who was still lying prone on the ground, most of his shirt gone, his arms covered by scratches as they covered his head.*

*He pointed the shotgun at Steve as he said "Roll over."*

*Steve did so and then he did either the smartest or the dumbest thing he sat up and he tackled him around the waist and he brought him to the ground and when the guy hit the ground Steve was on him. Steve was riding on pure adrenaline as they wrestled for the shotgun, first Steve had the upper hand then the guy managed to get Steve on his back as Steve had his hands on the barrel of the shotgun pushing up as the guy was pushing down on it attempting to use it to choke Steve so once again with defeat closing in he used the only thing he had....his knee.*

*He raised his knee and hit him hard in the crotch and the guy screamed a high pitched wail of pain causing him to drop his hold on the shotgun as he grabbed for his crotch and Steve kicked him the rest of the way off of him.*

*"This shotgun only has two shots you stupid mother fucker!" Steve says as he throws the shotgun to the ground.*

*"Yeah but this gun has six shots and a silencer you stupid mother fucker!!" The bigger guy said to Steve from behind and Steve turned and then he heard a shot....then nothing as he fell into the arms of darkness.*

*They finally made it to Ardmore and they found the place where the Junior Wheeler was playing with his band and obviously this band's security was nothing like Journey's security because they were able to make it backstage where the band was rehearsing and doing a sound check. They grabbed a helper backstage and he pointed out which one Glenn was and the guy was even nice enough to go and tell him and it wasn't long before a very tall Texan sauntered their way and Neal felt the bones in his hand snap, crackle and pop as they shook hands.*

*"Whoa hey man easy on the digits you know." Neal says as he shakes his hand out.*

*"Sorry. So what can I do for you boys?" Glenn asks.*

*"We're...." Neal starts to say.*

*"Oh I know who you guys are and it is quite an honor. So what brings the famous Neal Schon and of course Ross to Oklahoma?"*

*Neal looks at Ross. "We wanted to talk to you about the guitar that you won in the contest...."*

*Glenn laughs. "You don't want it back do you?"*

*Neal and Ross laugh. "Yeah actually we do." Ross says.*

*"I mean I have another guitar I can swap with you and there might even be some money involved if you know what I mean...." Neal says.*

*Glenn makes a face. "I would love to help you guys out but...."*

*"...But...." Ross and Neal say together.*

*A few minutes later Neal is talking out loud to himself as they go back to the car.*

*"Can you believe that he lost it in a poker game???! My guitar!!! He lost my guitar in a poker game!!! Unfucking believable!!! Holy shit!!!!!"*

*"Neal!!!" Ross yells.*

*"What?!!" Neal yells back at him.*

*"When Glenn won it in the contest it stopped being yours, he could do whatever he wanted with it."*

*"And that guy calls himself a musician!! I mean he had an original guitar signed by me, Neal Schon, and he lost it in a poker game!!! This will be the last time I give anything to be won in any contest anywhere!!!"*

*"Yeah right! Get in the car ego boy!!!" Ross says. "At least the guy who won it is in the next town so it isn't that bad. So let's go."*

*Neal starts the car and they head off to the next town which was only a 30 minute drive.*

*"Okay according to Glenn Jr. the guy's name was Chuck and he was a mechanic and he had red hair. And look there is a garage right there!" Ross says happily as he points.*

*They get out and they find Chuck and after having a conversation with him, which was difficult, because the night of the poker game he was drunk and he doesn't remember a thing except the fact that he couldn't play a guitar and he doesn't know why he wound up with it in the first place. So the next day in the glaring light of day when he sobered up he had taken it to the Pawn Shop, which was in the next town and it was two hours away.*

*"Damn it to hell!!!!" Neal exclaims as he beats on the dash of the car. Neal was so upset that Ross had to drive and drive they did the two hours to the next town and when they found the Pawn Shop they parked in front of.*

*"Neal it's closed until Wednesday!" Ross exclaims.*

*"What?" Neal says.*

*“There’s been a death in the family so their closed until Wednesday.”*

*“Damn!!” Neal says. “Do you see it anywhere?” Neal asks as Ross peeks in the window.*

*“No.” Ross says.*

*“Damn it! Damn it!! God this is so frustrating!! It seems like when we get this close we are shoved back three steps!!! Now we have to wait until Wednesday! I can’t stand it!” Neal says as he sits down on a bench that is in front of the store holding his head.*

*“We have plenty of time; they gave us until next Sunday. I mean this is Oklahoma City so it isn’t like it’s a small town, we’ll just have to wait.” Ross sits down next to him. “Neal I feel like you do but we have to wait.”*

*Neal rocks back and forth on the bench as he holds his head. “Okay, alright we wait. We wait....”*

*Steve was waiting. Waiting to die because when that gun went off he thought that was it. It was like something out of a horror movie, he saw the gun and it was huge and it seem to be bigger than that shotgun although it wasn’t and he heard the noise of the gun going off and he could smell the sulfur of the gun powder and it all was in....slow....motion.*

*So Steve was surprised when he woke up back in his little room with a pounding headache and every bone and muscle in his body hurting and he didn’t know how long he had been out but it had been awhile because now it was dark, very dark. The lantern that was provided for him was not lit and the little light he had was from the full moon shining through the vent so Steve didn’t know just how badly hurt he was. He ran his hands up and down his body looking for a bullet wound or something and finally he found it. It was on his upper arm and it was just a graze, luckily. Those damn dogs if it hadn’t been for those damn dogs he would have made it and he knows it. He may have drifted off to sleep again because the next thing he knew he was being grabbed by his arm and hauled to his feet.*

*“You little prick! You hurt my partner and now I’m going to hurt you!” The bigger guy says as he gives Steve a shake.*

*“Screw you!” Steve spat back.*

*“Holy shit you must have a death wish.”*

*“No! I just don’t care anymore! Back there you could have killed me but you didn’t!” Steve says.*

*“That was my partner’s doing! For some strange reason he likes you and I think that he likes you too much but I don’t like you! As a matter of fact I hate your skinny ass but I am going to make you a deal.”*

*“Who are you fucking Monty Hall?” Steve asks sarcastically and for his trouble he gets a slap across the head.*

*“In case you haven’t noticed I left the door open....” He says and Steve looks and sure enough it is open wide open and on the other side of the fence is a street light.*

*Steve looks back at him. "So?"*

*"So all you have to do..." The guy says as he drops Steve and he backs up with his arms in the air. "...is get by me and you're free."*

*"What about the dogs?" Steve asks.*

*"Don't worry about them. It's just you and me....give me your best shot."*

*Steve thinks about this as he drops down to one knee. Steve knows that there is no way in hell that in any kind of fair fight with this gorilla will he come out as the victor so maybe it is time for some dirty pool. Now Steve doesn't like to fight and he can do without confrontation but when he is pushed beyond his limit like now well he does what he has to do. God knows that he has had his share of fights as a kid and then again as a teenager but he doesn't know if he has any experience with a guy this size. What is that old saying? The bigger they are....the harder they fall?*

*Steve takes off and he tackles the big guy around his waist and he drives him back into the wall and while Steve has him off guard Steve balls up his fist and he hits him square on the jaw and unfortunately it only serves to hurt Steve's hand. Steve grabs his hand as the guy grabs him from behind. Steve repeatedly kicks him in his knee until he lets Steve go then Steve takes off for the open door but he doesn't get far because the guy reaches out and he grabs Steve by his hair.*

*"Let me go!!" Steve yells.*

*The guy grabs Steve and he pulls him back to him then Steve did the exact same thing that he did back at Neal's house....he bit him on the forearm and the guy screamed and he slapped Steve across the back of the head then he drops him and instead of running for the door Steve turns and he reaches for the guy's head and he pulls off the guy's ski mask and they both stop and they look at one another.*

*"Bastard!" The guy yells as he covers his face.*

*"Shit!!! I didn't mean to..." Steve says as he backs up to the door dropping the ski mask to the ground.*

*"You're going to be sorry that you did that!" The guy says as he advances on Steve.*

*"No look I didn't mean to! I didn't see anything I swear!!!"*

*Steve turns in a lame attempt to make it out of the door but he is grabbed by his arm and the guy flings him across the room and Steve lands against the wall and as Steve slides down it the guy reaches up for the door and he pulls it down.*

*"You lose." Then he approaches Steve.*

*Steve found out that the old saying 'The bigger they are, the harder they fall' was a....lie.*

*Neal and Ross found out that he was true to his word, he did page Neal when he said that he would and Neal since they were in the hotel room he was able to call him back in the required 20 minutes.*

*“That was fast.” The voice on the other end says.*

*Neal wasn't sure that he dialed the right number. “Who is this?” Neal asks as he looks at Ross.*

*“You know your buddy is a pain in the ass.”*

*“Well that's Steve always winning friends and influencing people everywhere he goes. Who is this?” Neal asks again.*

*“I am the other half of this equation.”*

*“So there are two of you?” Neal asks.*

*The voice on the other end laughs. “So how many hands did you need to figure that out?”*

*“Prick....” Neal says.*

*“Are you sure you and your buddy aren't related?”*

*“Positive? Why?” Neal asks as he rubs his face.*

*“Because you and him have the same mouth on you. Do you kiss your mother with that mouth?”*

*“Alright....” Neal says.*

*“So do you have the guitar yet?”*

*Neal looks at Ross. “No. I told your partner that it was complicated. We have to track it down, we've been traveling.”*

*Silence then he says, “Where are you?”*

*“Oklahoma City.” Neal says. “Don't worry you're get it with plenty of time to spare.”*

*“For your buddy's sake I hope so. He's beginning to wear thin on me. He has caused nothing but trouble. Write down this number”*

*“Ross get me some paper and a pen.”*

*Ross goes to the desk and he finds a notepad and a pen and he hands them to Neal. “Okay go ahead.”*

*“When you get the guitar call this number...” The guy rattles off a phone number and Neal scribbles it down. “Can I talk to Steve now?” Neal asks.*

*Silence.*

*“Hello?” Neal says.*

*"No can do."*

*"Why?" Neal asks.*

*"I'm afraid he's out for the evening."*

*Neal looks at Ross.*

*"What?" Ross says.*

*"What do you mean he's out for the evening?" Neal asks.*

*"Out as in unconscious."*

*"Un...unconscious?" Neal says.*

*"Unconscious?" Ross asks.*

*"What did you do to him?" Neal asks.*

*The man laughs. "What did I do to him? That buddy of yours is a troublemaker but I will say one thing he is a scrapper and the only way to stop him from causing trouble and running his mouth was to shut him up."*

*"If you hurt him...." Neal says.*

*"If I hurt him?" The guy laughs. "What will you do? If you're the same size as him you better bring back up. The faster you get that guitar the faster you will have him back."*

*Silence then dial tone.*

*"Shit!!!" Neal yells as he slams down the phone.*

*"Neal is Steve alright?" Ross asks.*

*"I don't know Ross I hope so....I hope so."*

## **MONDAY**

*He was in and out. In and out of conscious. When he was conscious he was barely able to crawl to the bucket in the corner and throw up in it. He couldn't even keep down water. At one point he blacked out at the bucket. Everything hurt. No one in his life had ever beaten him like that. Ever. He was beaten within an inch of his life. At some point he was aware of somebody there. He could feel fresh air and there was a warm soothing hand on his forehead. Whoever was there made sure that he was covered by the blanket and they held his hand. He wanted to open his eyes and look but one was sealed shut and it throbbed and just to open the other was too much effort at this point. Was he close to dying? Probably so, if this is what dying felt like then he was dying. Sleep. Sleep is all that he wanted to do and he still could feel*

*that presence next to him and so he let himself go, drift back off to wherever you go when the pain got to be too much secure in the knowing that he wasn't alone.*

## TUESDAY

*Steve was being carried. He was wrapped up in his blanket and he was being carried on the shoulder of the one that had beat him senseless and he was being taken to the office and when he got there he was placed in the tub and the smaller guy was in charge of disrobing him. He took off the blanket and what shirt was left on his back and when he put his hand on the button of his jeans that is when Steve started to push his hand away.*

*"I can do it." Steve protests.*

*The smaller guy takes a deep breath. "You haven't got anything that I haven't seen before."*

*"I can still do it, just help me up." Steve says.*

*The smaller guy grabs Steve by his hand and he helps him to his feet. Once on his feet Steve wobbles and he reaches out for the guys shoulder.*

*"Are you alright?" He asks.*

*"Do I look like I'm alright?" Steve asks.*

*"No you look like shit. Maybe the shower will help. There's soap and shampoo and I got you some clean clothes."*

*Steve raises his eyebrows to this. "Really, how did you know my size?"*

*"From those clothes there, nothing fancy. Jeans and a T-shirt, Jesus you reek. Go ahead and take your shower I'll be close by if you need...."*

*"Thanks." Steve said as he pulled the shower curtain closed and then a minute later the old jeans that he was wearing came sailing over the rod. Steve turned on the water and he let it run until it was warm and then he let it get hot as hot as he could stand it. He stood under that hot water letting it cascade over him helping it to work out the stiffness and the pain in his muscles, he was afraid to look because he was might see blood running down the drain. His hair would be the next big chore. It was matted with all sorts of things, sweat, vomit and probably blood. He was in that shower for what seemed like hours and he was hoping that when he opened his eyes he would see his shower back home but....no such luck. No rubber ducky and no coordinated towels no nothing but the stark reality of where he was.*

*Steve grabbed one of the towels off of the rod and he dried himself off then he wrapped it around his waist and with the other towel he covered his head as he stepped out of the shower and since the towel was covering his head he didn't noticed that he was being watched until he pulled it off of his head.*

*"Enjoying the show?" Steve asks to the smaller guy who sat on the corner of the desk holding the shotgun swinging his foot back and forth.*

*"I was worried; you were in there for so long I thought you might have drowned."*

*Steve laughs. "Oh yeah you were worried. Where were you when your buddy was beating the shit out of me? So screw your worry." Steve says as he continues to dry his hair.*

*"You brought it on yourself you know." The guy says.*

*Steve looks at him.*

*"All you had to do man was behave. Keep your mouth shut and don't cause any trouble...."  
The guy says. "But oh no you had to push it...."*

*"You don't know me...." Steve says.*

*"I would like to. I thought we could be friends...."*

*Steve laughs. "You and I...friends, I don't think so. You and I..." Steve replies as he points at him then at himself. "...Don't run in the same circles."*

*The guy looks at the floor then he looks back up. "Oh so I guess you're saying that you're better than me, is that it. You probably have a big house like your friend and I know that you drive a fancy car. A Mercedes is expensive...."*

*"No that isn't what I'm saying, you run in illegal circles and I don't, that is what I meant. I need to take a piss could you turn around or something?" Steve asks.*

*The guy shakes his head. "Nope. After all the shit that you have pulled I have to keep an eye on you. On all of you. You're wearing a towel; I can't see anything so go ahead."*

*Steve mumbles under his breath as he turns and he takes a piss and that isn't easy under a pair of prying eyes and a shotgun. When Steve finishes that he looks in the cracked mirror over the sink.*

*"Jesus I look horrible." Steve says.*

*"Oh yeah you have quite a shiner going on there. Hurry and get dress I have some food for you."*

*Steve looks at the clothes folded neatly on the lid of the toilet tank and he looks back over his shoulder. It will do no good to ask just like when he needed to take a piss so he might as well go ahead and do it and for the first time in days he felt hungry. He turned his back and he unties the towel and he lets it drop to the floor and then he reaches for the pair of jeans and he slips them on then he pulls the t-shirt on over his head.*

*"Nice ass." The guy says as he smiles.*

*Steve ignores that remark as he asks, "No socks?"*

*The guy shrugs. "You can't have everything man. Come here." The guy says as he stands up.*

*So like a good captive Steve obeys and he goes to him.*

*"Sit down." The guy points with the shotgun to the chair that is on the opposite side of the desk.*

*Steve sits down and then the guy pulls out a pair of handcuffs from his back pocket.*

*“Kinky.” Steve says. “That really isn’t my scene but thanks anyway.”*

*The guy smiles as he handcuffs one of Steve’s wrists to the arm of the chair.*

*“So what is your scene?”*

*“You will never know.” Steve says as he watches the guy go to the file cabinet and come back with a bag of food from a local burger place then he goes back one more time to get the drink that goes along with it.*

*“I have to eat with one hand? Now that is rude.” Steve replies.*

*The guy laughs as he opens the bag and he lays the food out in front of him and Steve just looks at it.*

*“You aren’t going to make me go through all that shit again are you? If I wanted to poison you don’t you think I would have done it by now?” The guy asks as he sits on the opposite side of the desk.*

*Steve looks at the food then he looks at him and that food looks good and somehow what that guy just said made some sense if anything a kidnapper says makes sense. Steve picks up the cheeseburger and he takes a bite out of it. “So you don’t eat?” Steve asks.*

*“I already did and thanks for asking.”*

*“Where’s your partner in crime?” Steve asks.*

*“He’s cleaning out a new room for you; the last one was a pig’s sty.”*

*Steve takes a sip of the drink. “So this is what you do?” Steve asks as he sits down the drink and he grabs a few French fries.*

*“Do?” The guy asks.*

*“Yeah ‘do’ man, you know kidnap people for a living, for a profession, your job?”*

*The guy laughs. “No. This isn’t my profession.”*

*Steve thinks about this for a moment then he says, “Oh okay so you’re a thief?”*

*“I like to call it a ‘Liberator of fine goods’.” The guy says.*

*Steve laughs. “Oh fuck!! That’s rich! Liberator of fine goods! That’s funny!” Steve points at him. “How did I get so lucky to get a thief and a kidnapper with a sense of humor?”*

*“You asked.” The guy replies as he shrugs.*

*“So how long have you been doing this?” Steve asks as he takes another bite out of the burger.*

*“Long enough, so what’s your story?”*

*Steve looks at him. "My story?" Steve asks.*

*"Yeah man your story. Like how do you afford that expensive car?"*

*Steve looks at him again. "I work like everybody else."*

*"Really? On your back?" The guy asks.*

*Steve couldn't have heard him right. "What did you say?"*

*The guy leans in closer. "I said on your back...?"*

*"No..." Steve says loudly.*

*"Hey man there's nothing wrong with that..."*

*"I said I don't..." Steve says loudly again.*

*"...I'm a thief and a kidnapper so I see nothing wrong with being a hooker..."*

*"Look....!" Steve says.*

*The guy covers his mouth. "Oh I'm sorry maybe you prefer the term male prostitute?"*

*"What makes you think...?" Steve asks.*

*"Well just look at you, I mean your sexy." The guy says as he gets up and he walks around the desk looking at Steve. "I bet you attract both women and men..." He says as he reaches out and he takes some of Steve's hair and Steve jerks his head to the side.*

*"Don't..." Steve says.*

*"Why? It's nice and you know I'm attracted to you too." He leans in and he says in Steve's ear. "Remember when you said that you would do anything?"*

*Steve closes his eyes and he shakes his head.*

*"No you don't remember? Well I do..." The guy pulls Steve head back and he leans in to kiss him and then he starts to laugh and he pushes his head away. "Stupid fucker!!! Oh man I really had you going!"*

*"What do you mean?" Steve asks.*

*The guy has one hand on his chest as he laughs. "I know you're a singer."*

*Steve eyes widen as he looks at him. "Then why did you....?!"*

*"Because you're so cute when you're angry. You should see yourself, your eyes sparkle and your face is flush...."*

*"You aren't as big as your buddy..." Steve says.*

*“...Wanna bet?” He says as he tilts his head to one side.*

*Steve sidesteps that remark. “...If your buddy hadn’t come along out there in that field...”*

*The guy moves closer to him again. “You would have done what exactly? Hmmmm?” He says as he traces his hand on Steve’s back as he stops behind him. “What would you have done?”*

*“I would have killed you....” Steve replies without hesitation.*

*He moves around now to stand next to Steve and he is so close that Steve can hear him breathing.*

*“Na you don’t have that in you....” He says.*

*Steve holds up his wrist. “Take off this handcuff and get rid of that shotgun and we’ll find out.”*

*“I’ll do you one better...” He says.*

*Steve looks at him. “What do you mean?”*

*He leans over as he says, “Let me and I’ll let you go.”*

*Steve doesn’t like the path that this conversation has taken. “Let you what....?”*

*He whispers in Steve’s ear and Steve closes his eyes. “No.”*

*“Oh come on you know you want to....” He says as he tilts Steve’s chin upward and then this time he does kiss him.*

*“Isn’t this cozy?”*

*They both look to see the other guy standing in the doorway and then Steve pushes the smaller guy away from him as he wipes his mouth with the back of his hand.*

*“What did I tell you?” He says to his partner.*

*“Sorry.” He says.*

*“And you finish that food.” He says to Steve. “It’ll be dark soon and we have stuff to do and you have to go back to your room. Can you keep your hands to yourself while I take out the trash?”*

*“Yeah.” The smaller guy says.*

*His partner looks at him then he leaves the office and he grabs the two full trash bags there and he takes them around the corner. Neither of them says anything else as Steve finishes eating.*

*It was an intense dream and it had to be the most intense sexual dream that Steve had ever had because the hands on him felt real. First they pulled the blanket off of him and the only light was moonlight filtering in from the vent so the image that he saw was in silhouette.*

*After the blanket warm hands found their way up his legs to the button and zipper on his jeans and soon they were pulled off. Steve's hands were on the person's head as if to guide them as their mouth found the way between his legs and Steve arched his back in response as he moaned loudly and just when he thought that he couldn't take or stand anymore he gasps as he feels a slight weight on him as the person mounted him. Hands reached for Steve's hands and then they were placed on her breasts and they both moaned as nerve endings were brought to life and his hands moved down to grasp her waist as they moved in an instinct born rhythm. She leans over, her breasts brushing against his chest as she kisses him, his hands now down on her rear. Steve moans and he feels a shiver as her tongue touches his and he moves one hand up to the small of her back as he flips her over onto her back. She cries out as she feels the momentum shift and now Steve has control as he grasps the mattress on either side of her head. He raises himself up slightly on his knees as she wraps her legs around him her hands now on his rear pushing him down deeper into her as she rises up to meet his thrusts.*

*Steve has his head back and his eyes closed as his breathing now comes in quick short bursts and their moans mingle as she takes his head and brings it down to her breasts, she arches her back as she feels his tongue on her nipples she moves her hands up his back her nails leaving deep furrows as he feels her shake. He gives one last hard thrust at the moment when she arched her back and Steve once again tosses his head back as he feels her about to climax he stops breathing as their orgasms are combined.*

*"Shit....oh shit!" Steve exclaims as he feels a shudder run through him and she reaches out to him as he collapses into her arms their sweat and breathing as one. She runs her hands thru his hair as she kisses him.*

*"Looks can be deceiving." She whispers breathlessly in his ear.*

*The next morning Steve woke up alone.*

### WEDNESDAY

*The next morning Neal and Ross were the first customers at the Pawn Shop and when they walked into the store the bell above the door brought the man from the back.*

*"Can I help you guys?"*

*"We're looking for a guitar." Ross says.*

*"We have plenty." The man says as he gestures to the numerous guitars hanging on the wall where Neal was already looking through them.*

*"But we're looking for a certain one." Neal says. "It's a Fender Stratocaster...."*

*"Maroon...." Ross adds.*

*"....With an Italian flag on it...." Neal finishes.*

*"A Fender Stratocaster, maroon with an Italian flag?" The guy repeats as he thinks about it.*

*"Yeah." Neal says hopefully as he approaches the counter.*

*“Let me go and check in the back.” He says as he turns going into the back room.*

*Neal paces the store as Ross taps incessantly on the counter and then finally he comes back and Neal runs back to the counter.*

*“I sold it.” The man says simply as if it was just another guitar or another piece of merchandise.*

*“Fuck!!!” Neal exclaims loudly and the man looks at him. “Who did you sell it to?”*

*“Are you the cops?” The man asks.*

*Neal and Ross look at each other. “No....” Ross says.*

*“Then since you aren’t the cops I won’t even bother asking about a warrant.” The man says.*

*“Look man we need that guitar! Who did you sell it to?” Neal asks again and with each word Neal was getting close to vaulting over the counter.*

*“I can’t tell you that! There is such a thing as privacy laws you know....”*

*“Fuck the privacy laws.....!!!!” Neal says loudly as he raises his leg to go over the counter when Ross grabbed him.*

*“Neal....!”*

*Somewhere somehow in the midst of all of this Neal noticed the girl. He could see her over the guy’s shoulder in the back room holding a handful of papers and a pen.*

*“Dad should I call the police?” She asks.*

*“No Karen it’s alright.”*

*Karen nods her head as she turns and goes back to whatever she was doing. Neal could see that she was homespun, long blonde hair, simply dressed and no where near plain. As Neal continues to watch she comes back into view and she looks at him.*

*“Do you want the shotgun?” She asks calmly as if this was an everyday occurrence. Two crazed rock stars looking for a guitar to save their long hair, skinny assed lead singer. Oh yeah man just another day in frigging Oklahoma City.*

*“Shotgun?” Ross says. “Neal go outside...” Ross shakes him.*

*When Neal doesn’t move fast enough to suit him. “Neal!!! You dumb fucker I said go outside!!!” Ross says as he pushes him toward the door and he watches as Neal leaves.*

*“Okay how much?” Ross asks as he takes out his checkbook.*

*“How much for what exactly?” The man asks.*

*“The guitar. I’ll pay you double whatever you sold it for if you tell me who you sold it to....” Ross says as he waits his pen poised over his checkbook.*

*The man laughs. "You just don't get it do you?" He says as he leans over the counter in Ross's direction. "I can't tell you who I sold it to!! I don't care if you can write a check to pay off the National Debt I can't and I won't!! Now get out of my store before I do something that you and your friend out there will regret!!"*

*Ross just looks at him as he throws the pen across the counter and he grabs his checkbook and he leaves.*

*To add to their problems and if it doesn't make matters worse Neal had disappeared. Ross walked up and down the block and then he drove and he saw nothing. After all this was Oklahoma City and Neal couldn't get into too much trouble here unlike L.A. San Fran, Denver, and Dallas etc. So Ross did the only thing that he could do, he went back to the hotel and straight to the restaurant that they had there, he got a paper, eventually Neal would have to return to the hotel.*

*Ross was watching television back in the hotel room when Neal showed up.*

*"Hey." Neal says as he comes into the room and he takes off his jacket.*

*"Don't hey me where in the hell have you been?" Ross asks.*

*"Working on a plan...." Neal says.*

*"A plan?" Ross repeats.*

*"A run around the end...." Neal says.*

*"A run around the....Neal what did you do? What are you planning? Nothing illegal I hope."*

*"Not unless she's underage...." Neal says.*

*At that moment Ross was calm but at that statement he came out of the chair and he crossed the distance of that room probably breaking the old land speed record.*

*"She? She who?" Ross says as he stands close to Neal looking him in the eyes.*

*"There's a girl...." Neal replies.*

*"Isn't there always?" Ross says.*

*"Ross...." Neal says.*

*"Neal don't you Ross me, a girl? Neal we don't have time for you to dip your wick in the local waters if you catch my drift man!"*

*"This isn't an ordinary girl man. She's special...." Neal says.*

*Ross laughs as he throws his arms up in the air. "Oh man I wish I had a dime for every time you said that! Okay I'll bite what makes her so special?"*

*Neal puts his arm around Ross's shoulders. "She works at the Pawn Shop. You know Karen? The one who wanted to know if her father wanted the shotgun....?"*

*Ross looks at Neal. "Karen? From the Pawn Shop?"*

*Neal nods his head. "Yeah. She heard the whole conversation and for the price of a dinner and a little of the old Schon's charm...."*

*Ross snorts at this.*

*"...To grease the wheel she's going to give me the address of the person who bought the guitar." Neal hits Ross on the chest. "She's pretty man so it won't be that difficult."*

*"Neal...." Ross says as Neal goes to the closet looking thru his clothes.*

*"Hmmm....?" Neal replies.*

*"What if she wants more than, you know, dinner?" Ross says.*

*Neal looks at him. "Well then I guess she'll be introduced to Neal Junior. Remember what we decided on the way to the airport back in California?"*

*"Yeah....no matter what it takes...." Ross says.*

*"...Or how much we have to spend...." Neal says.*

*"...Or what lines we have to cross...." Ross says.*

*"And if that means sleeping with a pretty girl well then so be it....I am willing to go to those lengths. Help me pick something out to wear to dinner."*

*"What about a box of condoms?" Ross says.*

*"Thanks for reminding me to stop at the drugstore on the way to her apartment. Now I want something that says stylish but nothing to....if you know what I mean."*

*"Okay what about those pants, that shirt and that jacket and boots...." Ross points out.*

*"Those pants are really tight..."*

*"And....?" Ross replies.*

*Neal's eyes widen. "Oh yeah good point!!"*

*"So where are you going to dinner?" Ross asks.*

*"I told her to pick the place so it will probably end up being expensive...." Neal says.*

*"Neal you know I'm wondering what's in that guitar."*

*"You're wondering? What could cause all of this trouble?" Neal says.*

*"Drugs maybe?" Ross offers.*

*Neal shrugs. "I don't really want to know what's in it that way we may be safe...."*

*“Steve wasn’t safe and he’s the most innocent one of all of us.” Ross says as he looks at Neal.*

*“I know....” Neal says.*

*“What about that connection thing that you and Steve have....”*

*Ah that connection thing. It was odd but true and at times it was hard for Neal to admit to it but there was something, it raised its ugly head the first night in that hotel room when they wrote “Patiently” and ever since it was a constant companion, that third wheel, that old port in that storm, it had to be karma. Neal would be thinking about Steve and he would call or vice a versa or they would show up wearing the exact same thing. They also knew when the other needed help or was in trouble like now.*

*The look on Neal’s face gave Ross pause. “....Neal I know it’s a touchy subject....”*

*“No, no it’s okay. I think he’s alright I don’t feel anything....bad.” Neal says slowly.*

*“Well then that’s good right? Right?” Ross asks.*

*Neal pats Ross on his shoulder. “Yeah it’s good. I better go and jump in the shower.”*

*After Neal’s shower and after he got dressed Ross gave him the once over then he gave Neal the thumbs up.*

*“Wish me luck man.” Neal says.*

*“Good luck.”*

*Then Neal went out the door.*

### **THURSDAY**

*The next morning Ross was being shaken awake by Neal.*

*“Neal?” Ross says as he rubs his eyes and he looks at the clock, 7 a.m. “Did you just get in?”*

*“Yeah man I got it....” Neal says as he holds up a piece of paper.*

*“Where....?”*

*“You like craw fish don’t you Ross?” Neal asks as he raises his eyebrows.*

*“Don’t tell me....”*

*“I’ll call the airline....” Neal says.*

*“I’ll start to pack...” Ross says as he tosses the covers aside.*

*There were 426 bricks on that wall, 426 on that one and 426 on the other and Steve knew that because he had counted all of them, at least twice by now. Because he had been cooped up in this room of his since Tuesday evening and now it was Thursday and he only knew that because when he woke up there was a new newspaper and magazines he doesn't know when they were dropped off. On top of the newspaper and magazine was some food, at least they remembered to feed him.*

*The thought had entered his mind that when they were out doing whatever they illegally did and something happened to them what would happen to....him? His mind ran thru numerous deadly scenarios, a bank robbery, a jewelry store heist, an armor car robbery, and they all ended badly with his captors being shot dead and their secret dying with them and he being the....secret. Steve glanced over at the water jug. He had plenty of water. He heard that a person could live without food, well for at least a little while, but a person couldn't live without water. If his captors were to die so would he. Neal wouldn't know where to find him, hell; nobody would know where to find his....body. The walls were closing in. He was finding it hard to breathe and he couldn't stay in this place any longer. They weren't coming back and he knew it. Attention. He had to get somebody's attention.*

*"HEY! ANYBODY! SOMEBODY! I AM IN HERE!!! HELP ME!! ANYBODY! SOMEBODY! PLEASE!" Steve banged hard on the door as he yelled. He tried again and again until his hand was sore and he was just about to give up and go back and lie down in the corner when he thought he heard a voice.*

*"Hey is somebody in there?" The voice on the other side of the door said.*

*Steve runs back to the door. "Yes! Yes! I am in here! I've been kidnapped! Help me!"*

*The next thing Steve hears is the lock being wrenched from the door and then it flies open and he sees....*

*"Neal!!!! You found me!!!" Steve says as he runs to Neal.*

*"Of course you don't think I would have left you here do you?" Neal says as he holds a pair of bolt cutters. "Come on Perry let's go...." Neal held his hand out to him and then....*

*Steve wakes up.....looks around....and he screams.*

*The minute, the second, the millisecond that plane touched down in New Orleans Neal and Ross were off and running. Neal had to pay a little extra for first class so they could be the first ones off of the plane but it was worth it. Once in the terminal Neal rented a car and Ross collected the luggage and then they were driving like crazy through the city to get to their next destination.*

*The Blue Lizard Bar was where they were headed and once they got there Neal parked haphazardly at the curb and from there they fail to notice the parking meter and once they got to the bar they also fail to notice the big sign on the door as they ran pass it but once inside they did notice all the commotion going on. Construction and a lot of it, a big guy wearing a hard hat approached them.*

*"Can't you guys read?" He asks them.*

*Neal and Ross just look at him. "The sign on the door!!! This is a construction zone!! You can't be in here without hard hats! Now get out!!!"*

*"We're looking for somebody!!" Neal says.*

*"Yeah Felipe Connors!" Ross says.*

*"Never heard of him! Now get out!!!" The man says as he grabs them by their arms and he pushes them out of the door. "And stay out!!" He says as he closes the door behind them.*

*"Well.....you're momma!!!" Neal yells at the door.*

*"That was helpful Neal! What in the hell do we do now?"*

*"Psssst hey."*

*"Did you say something?" Neal asks Ross.*

*"No I...." Ross says as he shakes his head.*

*"I did, over here." They hear a voice from around the corner.*

*Neal and Ross look at one another then they slowly walk around the corner to find an older guy standing there.*

*"Heard you're looking for Felipe." The man says.*

*"Yeah well maybe." Ross says.*

*"Why?" The man asks.*

*"We're like...." Ross says.*

*"...Friends." Neal says.*

*"For fifty bucks I'll take you to your friend." The man offers.*

*Neal and Ross laugh at this. "That's crazy!" Neal says.*

*"Yeah how do we know that you're telling the truth?" Ross says.*

*"You don't but I'm the only one that knows where your friend is." The man says.*

*Neal and Ross look at one another. "Give us a minute okay?"*

*Neal grabs Ross and they move a few feet away. "What do we do?" Ross asks.*

*"He's the only one that knows where this Felipe character is...." Neal says.*

*"So he says....what if he's lying?" Ross says.*

*"Let's just give him twenty bucks and that's it...." Neal says as he takes ten dollars out of his pocket.*

*Ross takes out ten of his own and he hands it to Neal.*

*“All we have is twenty bucks, take it or leave it.” Neal says.*

*The man looks disgusted as he thinks about it. “Oh alright.” He says as he puts his hand out.*

*“Oh no, you’ll get this after you take us to where Felipe is.” Neal says.*

*“Got a car?” The man asks again with that same disgusted tone.*

*“Yeah.” Ross says.*

*They make their way back to the car which by now has a parking ticket on it.*

*“Damn!!” Neal says as he snatches it off of the windshield. Neal and Ross get in as the guy gets in the backseat. They drive thru the city as the guy gives them directions and where they end up is not pretty. It’s another bar but it is more than a little on the seedy side. Neal and Ross give it the once over.*

*“He’s in there?” Neal asks.*

*The guy nods.*

*“Are you sure?” Ross asks.*

*“Yes now can I have my twenty bucks?” The man asks.*

*“Look it’s not that I don’t trust you....but I don’t trust you. I’m going to go in and check.” Ross says.*

*In the next minute he gets out and he goes in then a second later he comes back and he sticks his head in the driver’s window, “Alright Neal give him the twenty.”*

*Neal hands over the twenty then the guy gets out of the car and they watch him amble off as Neal gets out of the car.*

*“Neal there’s something funny about this place.” Ross says.*

*“Funny? You mean funny ha-ha or funny strange?” Neal asks.*

*“Funny strange.” Ross says.*

*“Well what....?!” Neal asks.*

*Ross scratches his head. “I wasn’t in there long enough to find out.”*

*“Well let’s go in then and find this guy.”*

*They go in and the place to Neal looks like a typical bar and he has been in a few so they sit at the bar. Immediately they feel all eyes are on them. That isn’t too odd. They are after all a couple of new faces here; so what if all the cocktail waitresses are waiters dressed in tight black pants, shirtless and wearing a white bow tie and so what if the place is completely devoid*

*of any women. If Neal and Ross didn't know any better they would think that they were back in San Fran.*

*"Neal...." Ross says.*

*"Hi can I buy you a drink?" Neal looks to his right and standing there is a guy with semi long hair, tight jeans and a button down shirt that has two or three buttons open with a hopeful expression on his face.*

*"Me...?" Neal asks as he points to himself and it takes all that Ross has not to burst out laughing.*

*"Yeah I'm Robert." He says as he extends his hand.*

*"Neal." Neal shakes his hand.*

*"So how about that drink Neal?" The guy asks again.*

*"Well I...." Neal says then he glances over at Ross whose trying his level best not to lose it. Neal reaches out and he takes Ross by his hand.*

*"Hey!" Ross exclaims.*

*"Sorry Robert but we're a couple...." Neal says as he holds up their clenched hands almost pulling Ross into his lap.*

*"We're a....?" Ross repeats.*

*Robert looks disappointed. "Oh sorry man I wasn't aware, I didn't realize...."*

*"Oh hey man no harm no fool, right honey?" Neal says as he glances at Ross.*

*"Oh sure sweetheart, guys hit on old Neal here all the time." Ross says as he slaps Neal on the back.*

*"Right Neal?"*

*Neal makes a noise. "He's the jealous type." Neal says.*

*"I don't blame him." Robert says as he turns and walks off.*

*"Neal you can let go of my hand now. Neal...." Ross says as he tries to pull his hand away from Neal's.*

*"Ross kiss me." Neal says.*

*"Did you just say kiss me?" Ross asks.*

*Neal leans in closer. "There's a guy coming your way that could be Herbie's cousin so kiss me!"*

*"Oh....!" So they lean in closer and they kiss and it takes both of their wills not to screw up their faces in disgust. Neal looks over Ross's shoulder. "He's walking away...."*

*“God that was disgusting....” Ross says.*

*The bartender puts two napkins down at their places. “Can I get you guys anything?”*

*“I really need a beer.” Neal says.*

*“Me too....” Ross says.*

*“Draft or bottle?” The bartender asks.*

*“Bottle.” They both say.*

*“Which brand?”*

*The guys name their brands and the bartender reaches under the counter and he grabs two bottles and he opens them and then he puts them in front of them.*

*“Anything else I get for you two?” The bartender asks as he wipes down the counter.*

*Neal almost forgot what they came in here for. “Yeah we looking for Felipe....”*

*“It’s his day off he’ll be back tomorrow. He works two to ten.”*

*Ross rubs his eyes. “Figures....”*

*“You’re sure he’ll be back here tomorrow?” Neal asks.*

*“Yes positive.” The bartender says.*

*Neal pulls some money out of his pocket and he puts it on the bar. “Thanks. Come on Ross let’s go. We need a hotel....”*

*Once back outside they get in the car. “That was a gay bar!! I hope you know that you....” Ross points at Neal. “....Are coming back here by yourself!”*

*“No way! I am not coming back here by myself!” Neal says.*

*“Yeah Robert might be here again!!” Ross starts to laugh. “Oh god! That was priceless!! ‘Hi my name is Robert can I buy you a....” Ross laughs again.*

*“Watch out Blondie you didn’t see who I was saving you from.” Neal says as he starts the car.*

*“When was the last time you brushed your teeth?” Ross asks.*

*“I don’t remember....” Neal says.*

*“Lovely. When we get a room make sure it has two beds. Neal....” Ross says.*

*“What?”*

*“What if....” Ross says.*

*Neal looks at Ross. "What if what....?"*

*"What if Felipe wants some incentive to give up that guitar?" Ross asks.*

*"We have money Ross...."*

*"I don't mean money Neal what if he wants...." Ross says as he gestures with his hand.*

*Neal looks at Ross with a horrified look.*

*"....You....?"*

*"....Me? What if he likes blondes Ross?" Neal asks loudly.*

*"That's not the point! The point is would we do that? Could we do that? Could....?"*

*"....Could I do that you mean?" Neal asks.*

*"Yeah."*

*Neal thinks a minute then he says seriously, "Yes. Ross I would do whatever it takes to get Steve back."*

*Neal spots a hotel and he drives into the parking lot and he stops and he puts it in park. "I guess that shocks you doesn't it?" Neal says as he grips the steering wheel.*

*Ross looks at him. "No."*

*"No?" Neal says. "Ross sometimes I just don't understand you."*

*"I would have been more shocked if you had said no to that question. Come on let's get a room."*

*Ross says as he gets out of the car and he leaves Neal wondering.*

*Steve wonders the last time he was so happy to find a frigging quarter. One frigging quarter and he found it in this place, between the door and the concrete and he was able to pry it out and he looked at it. It was an interesting thing to Steve that a quarter could provoke such a reaction but that was only because that quarter fit the screws that held the vent on the wall. He used that 25 cents like a poor man's screw driver to remove the screws from the vent and once he did he found that vent lead to a shaft. That shaft lead to another vent and that vent faced the outside to freedom. But Steve knew that he, even with his skinny ass as Neal liked to call it, would never fit through that shaft but he could use it for something else.*

*It was a dangerous prospect at best. A deadly idea. It was a killer of an idea and it could, might, kill him but it was worth a try. He had all the components. After he had balled up the newspapers and ripped some of the magazines in half he put them in the shaft and from his back pocket he pulled out a book of matches. In one of the moments in the office he was able to rummage quickly thru the desk until he found them and he slipped them into his back pocket, never knowing when or if they might come in handy. He took one of the matches out of the book and he closed the cover and he ran it across the strip and it caught fire with a smell of*

*sulfur and he touched it to the newspaper and when it took off he added more newspaper to it....the smoke. Someone somewhere will see the smoke. The highway wasn't that far away Steve knew, a passing motorist will see it and they would call the fire department or even better the police. Let them come....let them all come.*

*Taking that turn off of the highway is when they spotted the smoke. The bigger guy drove faster and when they got to the gate they slid to a stop and he got out and unlocked it.*

*"What in the hell is he trying to do? Burn the frigging place down?" He asked as he jumped back in the driver's seat then he drove in and he parked the car next to the office. He tossed the ski mask to his partner in the seat next to him then he put his own on as his partner gets out of the car and he runs into the office and he comes back out carrying the fire extinguisher.*

*"I'll take that!" He says as he takes the fire extinguisher away from him then they run in the direction of the smoke.*

*The wind had shifted or changed and now most of the smoke was being blown back into his box. Steve started coughing and coughing. Didn't he read somewhere that most people in a fire die from smoke inhalation and not from burning to death, his chest was tight and he fell to his knees and he crawled to the door hoping for some fresh air any air.*

*He comes to when a cup of cold water is thrown into his face. He sputters and stammers and he has to move his head to get the hair out of his eyes. Something is wrong with his hands. He opens his eyes to find that his wrists are handcuffed to the arms of the chair.*

*"Stupid ass!! What in the hell were you thinking?! You could have burned the whole place down!!"*

*Steve coughs. "At least this would be over."*

*"Fucking trouble maker!!! Get the kit!" The big guy barks to the smaller one.*

*"No." The smaller guy protests.*

*"Get it!! Now!"*

*The smaller looks at him and he knows it will do no good to protest further. Steve watches as the smaller guy goes to the file cabinet and he opens one of the drawers and he takes out a small black zippered bag.*

*The smaller guy hands the bag to him and he sets it on the desk then he opens it and then he takes out a syringe and a bottle.*

*Steve's eyes widen as he sits up bone straight in his chair. "What in the fuck is that?"*

*The bigger guy takes the cap off of the syringe and then he sticks it in the bottle and he fills the syringe.*

*"What....what is that?!" Steve asks again.*

*"It's just a sedative." The bigger guy says.*

*"You aren't going to give that to....me?" Steve asks.*

*“That’s the plan.”*

*“No!!! Fuck no!!!” Steve starts to struggle.*

*“Here you give injections better. I’ll hold him.”*

*He hands the syringe to his partner.*

*“Needles!!! I don’t like needles!! You’re crazy!!! Fuck you!!! No drugs!!! No....”*

*Before Steve can say anything else the bigger man grabs him by his neck and with the other hand he holds his arm down. His partner finds a vein holding the syringe up.*

*“No! No! Don’t do this....please!” Steve says thru clenched teeth looking at the smaller guy then they hear a siren in the background. As if on cue all three of them look toward the windows. The smaller guy looks at the bigger guy.*

*“Do it now! Hurry!!” He says as the siren grows closer.*

*“No! Please! Please! Don’t!!” Steve pleads.*

*The bigger guy tightens his grip around Steve’s neck and his arm. The smaller guy slaps his arm a few times raising a vein and Steve winces and still the siren closes in. Steve closes his eyes and he holds his breath as the needle finds its way into his vein.*

*And still the siren grows ever closer.*

*The smaller guy injects him with what is in the syringe and when it is over the bigger guy lets him go and he unlocks the handcuffs.*

*“Take him into the bathroom! Hurry! And keep him quiet! I’ll take care of the cop! Go!”*

*The bigger guy gathers up the handcuffs and the kit as the smaller guy helps Steve to his feet and he walks him into the bathroom as the police car comes to a stop outside of the gate and the siren is cut off in mid wail. The bigger guy watches as they go into the bathroom then he pulls the ski mask off of his head. Since Steve had been here last they had put a new door on the bathroom which was now closed behind them and the only real place to keep a hold of him was in the bathtub. So that is where they landed. They both stretched out in the bathtub, the smaller guy holding Steve from behind, his back resting on the smaller guy’s chest as he sits between his legs.*

*Whatever they had injected into him had burned going in but now it was numb and that Pink Floyd song flashed thru Steve’s mind. His hands were clenched in the hands of the one who held him as he laid his head back against the smaller guy’s shoulder.*

*“Why? Why....did you do that....to me? Why?” Steve whispered.*

*“I’m sorry...I didn’t have a choice.” He says as he closes his eyes and he whispers back to Steve.*

*Steve arches his back. “Jesus what was that stuff?”*

*"It was just a sedative."*

*"Liar....I thought....I thought....you liked....me?" Steve whispers.*

*"I do like you that's why I gave it to you. He would have hurt you on purpose."*

*Steve laughs. "And....and you didn't hurt me....on purpose? You're....happy....now you can do....whatever you want....to me...."*

*"No I wouldn't do that...."*

*Steve turns his head slightly and he whispers in his ear. "I don't....believe....you. Why should I....? All I wanted....was to get....away. Get....away....Neal....where are you? Neal....Neal....please come and get....me....Neal." Finally Steve closes his eyes and he rests his head on the smaller guy's shoulder as he falls asleep.*

*Neal sits up in bed. "Steve?" Neal looks around the room at Ross who is sleeping in the other bed across from him. It sounded real like Steve was right here in the room but Neal knew that it was all in his head. Blame that damn connection or thank it. Somewhere out there in the world was Steve and he was sending a message. Neal using the alarm clock as the only light reaches over and he grabs the phone and he dialed the number that had been burned into his memory and after more than a few rings it was finally answered.*

*"What? Do you have the guitar?" The voice asks and Neal recognizes it as being the voice from that very first phone call and that felt like years ago.*

*"Soon." Neal says. "Let me talk to Steve."*

*Silence. Silence that was too long for Neal. "I said let me talk to Steve."*

*"Can't." The voice says.*

*"Fucking bastard. I....want....to....talk....to....Steve."*

*"He's asleep."*

*"Liar." Neal says.*

*"Look...."*

*"No you look I want proof....proof of life." Neal says as he closes his eyes and he holds the phone cord tight in his hand. "I need something....I need to know that he's....alright."*

*Silence that was deafening and agonizing. He hears the voice on the other end breathing. "He's asleep and he called your name before he went to sleep. He wants you to come and get him."*

*Neal takes a deep breath. "Tell him to page me. Tell him to page me with what he always pages me with. He knows what it is and only he knows what it is....that is how I will know. Can you do that?"*

*More silence. "Yes and you....give me what I want. Can...you....do that?"*

*"Yes...." Neal says.*

*Silence and then dial tone. Neal slowly lets the receiver drop back into the cradle.*

### **FRIDAY**

*It had to be four or maybe even closer to five in the morning when Neal's pager vibrated itself right off of the night table next to his bed. Neal, who had only begun to fall asleep, sat up in bed and then he retrieved his pager from the floor. In the pre dawn darkness of the room the numbers on the pager were bright enough to signal a passing plane but it was all that Neal needed....it was silly actually. A code that he and Steve had worked out, just one of those secrets between them, a private joke. But now he was glad that they had come up with it because clutching that plastic box that was full of electrodes and wires and whatchamacallits and thingamajigs made Neal feel better because that meant that Steve was.....*

*"He gave it up?" The smaller guy asks.*

*"Yeah but not willingly....I had to twist his....arm." The bigger guy says.*

*"But he was able to tell you before you....?" The smaller guy asks.*

*"Yeah and by now his buddy is convinced that he is...."*

*"Alive....?" The smaller guy says.*

*The big guy nods his head. "We better get some sleep." He says.*

*How to fill the hours waiting for two o'clock in the afternoon to come around? What better way than to sleep was what Neal and Ross decided to do. They were both exhausted anyway. They were both weary from having been bounced around like a little round ball in one of those kids games but knowing that today, this very afternoon that had yet to be born, was going to be the end of it. This country-side trotting back and forth, this pitching and yawning like a small boat on the open water was ending today. That fact made them sleep better. All they had to do was retrieve the guitar from this Felipe character and then head back to California, call those people who were on the crazy train, give them the guitar and they would get Steve back. Pure and simple. Easy as pie.*

*At noon when the alarm went off Neal stumbled into the shower and when he got out Ross took his turn and then the next order of business was food. They couldn't wait to eat until later and that was another time passer and just so they wouldn't temp any fates they made themselves wait until at least 2:30 to give Felipe time to get there and get settled into his shift.*

*At that time in the afternoon the bar wasn't that busy and the music wasn't that loud and there was nothing to interfere with their hearing but Neal still wasn't sure that he had heard right.*

*"Wait, what did you just say?" Neal asked again.*

*"How many times are you going to ask me?" Felipe said.*

*"Until we understand you! Now what did you just say?" Ross says this time.*

*"For the tenth time I said I don't have it!"*

*"You don't....have it!!!?" Ross says as he starts to shake his head and even before he knows that he is doing it he starts to laugh.*

*Felipe looks at Ross. "Is he okay?"*

*"Where is it?" Neal asks.*

*"I sent it back...." Felipe answers simply.*

*"Sent it back where?" Neal asks.*

*"I bought it from the Pawn Shop while I was on vacation and when I got it home it didn't work.....so I know somebody, who knows somebody who said that I...."*

*Neal slams his hand down hard on the bar causing Felipe and Ross to jump.*

*"Where....did....you....send....it?" Neal asks again.*

*"Back to San Francisco...." Felipe says.*

*"San Fran....?" Ross says. "Shit!"*

*All of a sudden Neal feels the hair stand up on the back of his neck. "Who....?"*

*"He's a great guitar repair guy and his name is.....is ah...." Felipe says as he snaps his fingers as he thinks.*

*"....Frank?" Neal says as he puts two and two together.*

*"Frank Gustavo?" Ross adds.*

*Felipe's face lights up. "That's it! Frank....!"*

*The words were barely out of his mouth when Ross and Neal both cut and run.*

*"Hey what about the beer?" Felipe yells after them.*

*Neal stops and he turns around and he pulls a ten out of his pocket. "Keep the change!"*

*He says as he slams it down on the bar then he turns and runs out of the building. Luckily they had already packed their bags and paid their hotel tab and they also had already made*

*reservations on the next flight out to San Francisco in anticipation of getting the guitar and going home with it but now they were going back to where they started and it had been in San Francisco all this time. They had made nothing but a huge circle.*

*They raced to the airport risking a speeding ticket and Ross was keeping his eyes out for the police and once they got to the airport they found out that their plane was being delayed by weather back West. So they had to wait and wait and then they found out that the flight had been cancelled and there wasn't another until Saturday. Standing there at the ticket counter in the airport Neal looked at his pager and the number that was stored there, the number that Steve had always paged Neal with in the past. It was time to call in some favors and to see who their friends really were. Finding a pay phone Neal punched 0 for the operator and he told her that he wanted to make a collect call and he gave her the number, it rang once and then twice and then three and by the fourth ring it was answered.*

*"Sure operator I'll accept the charges. Neal....?"*

*"Herbie...." Neal looks at Ross. "We need your help...."*

*Neal keeping the rules of this game in mind he managed to convince Herbie to let them borrow the Journey plane, Sojourn, without really telling Herbie anything at all. After all this time and after all the years that Herbie has been their manager he knows when not to ask any deep questions. But there were always three that he needed to ask.*

*"Is anybody dead?" Herbie asks Neal.*

*"No."*

*"Is anybody in jail?" Herbie asks.*

*"No."*

*"Does this involve anything illegal?" Herbie asks Neal as Neal looks at Ross.*

*"No."*

*So after all of that Herbie arranged for the Sojourn to be flown to the closet Municipal Airport and all they had to do was to get themselves there. After a crazy cross town cab ride they ended up at the Municipal Airport and it was almost after midnight when the Sojourn finally landed and without any pomp or circumstance Neal and Ross boarded the plane and then they were off for San Francisco.*

*Because they didn't have to make any stops they got to San Francisco rather quickly, in an hour or so and from there they had the pilot take them to Neal's car which was at the airport and from there they went to Frank's house. The road to Frank's house was twisty and turny and what road in San Francisco isn't and Frank's house sat at the top of a hill with his guitar workshop in the back so that is where Neal parked the car. Neal and Ross, hell half the musicians in California knew about Frank's workshop and Neal had been here a few times himself and Neal would hate to think that Frank would have had anything to do with this.*

*"Neal it's late...." Ross points out.*

*"Why do you say that?" Neal asks.*

*“Because the place is dark that’s why, Frank is probably asleep.” Ross says.*

*Neal gets out of the car. “No, you know Frank, this time of night he is just getting started.”*

*Ross says to Neal across the roof of the car. “Then why are all the lights off?” Ross gestures as Neal looks around.*

*“Hey look there’s a piece of paper taped to the door.” Neal says as he points then he goes over to it.*

*“Fuck!!” Neal exclaims as he reads it.*

*“What is it now?” Ross asks as he walks over and he looks at the note. Ross looks at Neal. “Gone Fishing? He went fishing! That’s why the place is dark! Shit!! What do we do....Neal what are you doing?”*

*“I see it Ross!!!” Neal exclaims happily as he peers in the window and he points. “It’s on the stand, look!”*

*Ross peers into the window next to him. “Oh so it is....Neal what are you doing now!?”*

*“What does it look like I’m doing?” Neal asks as he picks up a good sized rock and he tosses it in mid-air a couple of times. “Breaking and entering....” Neal says as he takes the rock and he uses it to break out a pane of glass in the door.*

*“I can’t believe you just did that!” Ross says as he looks around.*

*“We can’t wait any longer Ross and if the police ask, I will tell them I did this by myself.”*

*Neal then breaks out the remaining glass before he reaches his hand in and down to unlock the door and once it was unlocked Neal pushed it open and he went inside and a few seconds later he emerged carrying the illusive guitar.*

*“I got it! Now let’s find a phone....”*

*“Neal you might want to you know....” Ross gestures to the door.*

*“Oh yeah right....” Neal reaches behind him and he pulls the door closed. “Now let’s find a phone.”*

*Neal not wanting to drive the 45 minutes to an hour it would take to get back to his house drove to an all night diner they knew of and that is where Neal used the phone to call that damnable phone number that he knew that he would never forget.*

*It rang once, twice then three times before it was answered.*

*“Yeah?” The voice of the bigger guy says.*

*“We got it. We got your fucking guitar. Let’s meet right now.”*

*Silence. “You got it? Really?” The voice says.*

*“Yeah you stupid mother fucker I got it!” Neal says.*

*“Temper, temper I still have what you want. We meet when I say....”*

*Neal leans against the wall with one hand clutching the receiver of the phone with the other.  
“When?”*

*Ross looks at Neal from the booth that is next to the phone.*

*“Tomorrow 3:30 in the afternoon. The warehouse district, you do know where that is don’t you?”*

*“Yes.” Neal replies.*

*“Warehouse number 34. Don’t be late and don’t bring the cops, just your partner. If you pull any sort of shit your boyfriend dies. Is that clear?”*

*“Crystal....” Neal glances at Ross.*

*“Until tomorrow.” The voice says then they hang up.*

### SATURDAY

*It was strange how memories had that ability to become reality and take on a life of their own and for them to take on a life of their own right here in his box, his cell, his room. Or maybe he was going crazy or maybe he was hallucinating or maybe that drug they gave to him is doing it to him. Oh wait; maybe that is the same thing as a hallucination? Isn’t it? Steve wasn’t sure but wasn’t it bad to talk to yourself? So if you were having a hallucination, and who’s to say what that is anyway, and you were having a conversation with it does that mean that you are, technically, talking to....yourself?*

*Steve didn’t know but what he did know was that he had been talking to Neal or he thought it was Neal. Neal had wanted the number that he had always paged him with and that was strange. If Neal already knew it then why did he want it so badly? So badly that he had to hurt him for it? Steve didn’t understand that at all. Later he would kick Neal’s ass. Yes that is what he would do. Kick Neal’s ass. But there was something else that Steve didn’t understand, if Neal had been here why didn’t he....save him? Rescue him? Take him away from here? Instead of doing what he had done. Neal had hurt him then he had moved....him but he didn’t move him out of here. He had moved him into someplace else. It was a smaller someplace else and felt rough to his touch but before he had a real chance to catch up mentally he felt himself falling asleep again so he let himself....go.*

*Go....Ross had to go home. He had things to check on back at his house and he told Neal that he would come back later to his house and then they would go from there. So now Ross was back and when he walked in the place was still a wreck and Neal was sitting on the sofa looking at the guitar that was in the stand across the room.*

*“Neal man did you get any sleep?” Ross asked.*

*“What? Oh yeah some....you know....some.” Neal says as he continues to look at the guitar.*

*Ross looks at Neal looking at the guitar. "Neal you know....curiosity might just kill the lead guitarist or the lead singer. You didn't you know...."*

*"What?" Neal looks up at him. "Oh no but don't think that I didn't want to. Why go to all this trouble? What's in that guitar?"*

*"Well in a few hours we'll find out....okay what else is bothering you?"*

*Neal gets up off of the sofa and he puts on his jacket. "Nothing."*

*"Neal come on...." Ross says.*

*"I just have a bad feeling that's all." Neal says. "And I won't feel better until I see Steve alive and well. Neal grabs the guitar. "Let's just go and get this over with."*

*"It's almost over...." The voice says.*

*"For you or me?" Steve asks.*

*"For both of us." The voice says.*

*"So that means Neal is bringing the guitar?" Steve asks.*

*"Yes." The voice says.*

*"What....what are you doing?" Steve asks.*

*"Don't you want to see....?" The voice asks.*

*"No! I mean I do but I don't...." Steve says. "....Knowing might be dangerous."*

*"For you or me?" The voice asks.*

*"For both of us." Steve says.*

*"Can you keep a secret?" The voice asks.*

*"From whom?" Steve asks.*

*"The world." The voice says.*

*"Like I said I don't want to see your face...." Steve says.*

*"I wasn't talking about my face...." The voice says.*

*"Then what....?" Steve asks.*

*"You weren't dreaming...." The voice says.*

*"I wasn't....I don't understand...." Steve says as he shakes his head.*

*"That night after I kissed you....now do you remember?" The voice asks.*

*"How do you know about that?" Steve asks.*

*"Because....it was me." The voice says.*

*"You? No! I had a dream about making love to a...."*

*"Woman...." They both say at the same time.*

*Steve points. "You're a....?!"*

*She simply nods her head.*

*"....And it wasn't a dream?" Steve asks.*

*"No." She says.*

*"It was....you!?" Steve asks.*

*"Yes."*

*"And you're really a....?" Steve asks.*

*"A woman? Yes."*

*"Holy shit!!!! Then why do you....?" Steve asks.*

*"....Dress like a guy?" She asks.*

*Steve nods his head.*

*"Because it's easier. Actually I can be anything or anybody I want to be if I hadn't told you would you think that I was a woman?"*

*"No....why did you tell me?" Steve asks.*

*"I just wanted you to know before...." She says.*

*"Before....?" Steve asks.*

*"Before this ends before I do what I have to do...." She says.*

*"Do? You don't have to do anything! I can keep any secret you want for as long as you want until the day I...." Steve says as he looks at her.*

*"It won't hurt I promise...." She says.*

*"What....dying?" Steve asks.*

*"Going to sleep....this is just to give us time." She says.*

*"Time?" Steve asks.*

*“Your buddies will be too busy looking for you so we can....” She says.*

*“....So you can run like....” Steve winces when she injects him. “Cowards....Jesus that shit....burns.”*

*“...Get away. Far away from here.” She says.*

*“What happened to you wanting us to be friends?” Steve asks.*

*“We don’t run in the same circles remember?” She says.*

*“Oh yeah you just run....period. Oh man that shit works....fast.” Steve says.*

*“Lie back....” She says.*

*“But why in this....?” Steve asks.*

*“To give us time....” She says.*

*“Someday your time will run out....” Steve says.*

*“For your sake you better hope that isn’t today....” She says as she padlocks it shut. “....For your sake...”*

*3:15 on an overcast Saturday afternoon and they sat in front of warehouse 34 waiting. They always seem to be waiting for something lately, for the next shoe to drop, for that next word in the sentence, for time to run out, for this to be over so they can go back to their boring, collective lives. Right now Ross would settle for boring. This waiting was nerve wracking on him and especially on Neal who was pacing back and forth.*

*“Neal give it a rest man.” Ross says out of the passenger window. “We’re early and they won’t be late.”*

*Neal picks up a rock and he throws it. “I’ll rest later.”*

*“Still got that bad feeling?” Ross asks.*

*Neal nods his head as he puts his hands in his pockets. “Yeah I do.” A sudden gust of wind blows Neal’s hair. “What time is it?”*

*“3:25.”*

*“Wait I hear something....” Neal says.*

*A minute later they see a non descript van with heavily tinted windows and a license plate covered by black tape approaching from the east side of the warehouse and they see it come to a stop.*

*“Ross give me the guitar.”*

*Ross reaches into the back seat and he grabs the guitar as neither of them take their eyes off of the van. Ross gets out of the car and standing next to Neal he hands him the guitar. Neal then takes a few steps forward and he holds the guitar high up in the air over his head and then the door on the van slides open and a big guy gets out, all dressed in black and wearing a ski mask carrying a shotgun and on his signal he starts to walk as the van drives slowly next to him pointing the shotgun in their direction.*

*“Holy shit.” Ross exclaims.*

*“So gentlemen we finally get to meet.” The big guy says. “You.” He points the shotgun at Ross. “Put your hands on your head, now!”*

*Ross does this quickly.*

*“Now you....” This time he points it at Neal. “Toss me the guitar.”*

*“No....” Neal says.*

*“Neal!!” Ross exclaims.*

*“We want Steve. Give him to us first then you get the guitar.” Neal says his eyes never leaving the man in front of him.*

*The big guy smirks. “You drive a hard bargain.”*

*The guys watch as he backs up a few steps and he reaches into the van and in the next second he is pulling Steve out by one arm from it, holding the shotgun in one hand he keeps a tight grip on Steve’s arm as he stands next to him. From where Ross is standing Steve looks completely out of it, his arms are hanging by his side and a hat is shoved down on his head and sunglasses hide his eyes.*

*“Steve?” Ross says and in response Steve raises his head slightly and he looks in Ross’s direction.*

*“Steve....?” Neal says.*

*“Neal...” Steve says as he tries to move in his direction but the big guy is still holding him by his arm.*

*“Are you okay?” Neal asks as he moves closer to him.*

*“Yeah man but I’ll be even better in a few minutes....give him the guitar Neal.”*

*“Neal....” Ross says as he moves closer to him.*

*The big guy levels the shotgun in Ross’s direction. “Don’t....”*

*“I don’t like this!” Ross says as he looks at them.*

*“Neal give him the guitar!!!” Steve says to him.*

*“Start him walking man and when he gets halfway I’ll toss it to you....” Neal says.*

*In the next second the big guy lets go of Steve's arm and he shoves him to get him walking in Neal's direction and when Steve reaches the halfway point Neal, instead of tossing it in the big guy's direction he tosses the guitar in the air and then Neal runs a few steps and he grabs Steve and then they turn to run.*

*"Steve come on!!! Get in the car!" Neal yells.*

*The guitar performs a lazy loop in the air before it hits the ground and when it does it hits hard and whatever seam it lands on splits open sending pieces of guitar all across the concrete.*

*"I don't think so."*

*Neal and Ross stop and they look back over their shoulders at whom they thought was Steve but now they know that this isn't Steve because this person is holding a gun and pointing it at them.*

*"Surprise. Alright guys turn around and back up against the car."*

*"You fucker!!!" Neal exclaims. "Where's Steve?"*

*Neal and Ross turn around and they back up until their butts are resting against the car.*

*"Son-of-a...." Ross says but he doesn't finish.*

*The Steve imposter waves his gun at them. "Uh huh now that isn't nice is it? Such language from two fine upstanding boys as yourself. Raise your hands! How's the guitar?" He asks without looking around.*

*"In pieces but that's okay because it makes it easier.....ah here we are!"*

*Neal and Ross look to see the bigger guy holding a purple velvet drawstring bag that was expelled from the guitar when it hit the concrete. The Steve imposter backs up to stand near his partner.*

*"Are they all there?"*

*"Seems to be..." The bigger guy says as he pours some of the content from the bag into his hand.*

*"Holy shit Neal!!!!" Ross says.*

*"Those are...." Neal says.*

*"Diamonds...." The big guy says.*

*"Oh at least two million dollars worth...." The Steve imposter says. "Thank you for keeping them safe for us." He says as he smiles.*

*"Fucking bastards! You lied to us...." Neal exclaims.*

*This causes the two bad guys to laugh. "Oh imagine that! Two criminals like us....lying!" The big guy says.*

*"It was an even trade!!! The guitar for Steve and now you got what you want....where's Steve!!!!???" Ross yells at them.*

*"He's right here!!!" The big guy says as he points to his partner and he laughs.*

*"Yeah Neal didn't I fool....you? Don't I sound like him? Don't I look like him?"*

*"He's quite the mimic don't you think?" The big guy says.*

*The Steve imposter bows. "Thank you."*

*Neal takes more than a few steps closer.*

*That causes the big guy to once again point the shotgun in Neal's direction but Neal instead of stopping in his tracks draws closer his hands now down at his sides.*

*"....Neal!!!" Ross yells at him.*

*"Stop!!!!" The big guy yells at Neal.*

*"Screw your games!!!! We kept up our end of the bargain now....where....is....Steve!!!!" Neal yells back.*

*"Stop or I'll shoot!!!" The big guy warns again.*

*"....NEAL!!!!!" Ross yells again.*

*"Go ahead!!! If Steve is dead what's the point????!! Shoot me.....!!!!" Neal says.*

*"NEAL HOLY SHIT DON'T DO THIS!!!!!" Ross yells.*

*"....Besides that shotgun will bring people running from at least five miles away....do it!!!!!"*

*Before Neal knew it he felt the sting of concrete pieces as they flew up into his face from someplace near his feet and to protect his eyes he raises his arms and the next thing he knew the Steve imposter was next to him holding the gun to his head.*

*"Neal....!!!!" Ross yells.*

*"Shut up!" The big guy says to Ross as he points the shotgun in his direction.*

*"Now did you hear that you prick!!!? Did you! This gun has a silencer on it and I could kill you and nobody would hear a thing! Give me a reason!!!"*

*"Look I'm sorry...." Neal says as he closes his eyes leaning his head to the side. "....All we want is Steve...."*

*"Yeah man just tell us...." Ross says.*

*"....Where he is...." Neal and Ross say at the same time.*

*"Your friend is about five miles north of here...." The big guy says.*

*“...And all you have to do....is find him.” The Steve imposter says.*

*“...You have an hour and a half or maybe two....” The big guy says.*

*“...Yeah it depends on your friend....” The Steve imposter says.*

*“Wait what do you mean....?” Ross says.*

*“An hour and half until what....?” Neal asks.*

*“Your friend has big lungs so he might last three hours....” The Steve imposter says.*

*“What do you mean....last?” Neal asks.*

*“What in the hell did you do?” Ross asks.*

*“When the oxygen runs out....” The big guy says.*

*“So does your friend....” The Steve imposter says.*

*“Oxygen?” Ross repeats.*

*Neal backs up. “Five miles? North of here? Ross....!”*

*Ross at that moment jumps in the car and he starts it up as Neal turns and runs to it and Neal dives thru the passenger side window into the passenger seat.*

*“Drive! Drive!” Neal yells.*

*This part was easy after all breathing was his life but now it could be his death. Breathing was his life. Slow, even breathes. It was all in the technique. Such as singing. Steve would laugh at people who told him that he made it look easy, singing that is. Truth be known; it was work. A constant maintenance schedule of his chords and control of your breathing was a major part of it. So this was a cake walk. That drug she gave to him made him calm and mellow and the lack of oxygen wasn't the problem the problem was what do when what he did have....ran out. How long would he last then? She said that Neal was on his way or was that a lie? She said this was to give them time by taking away his....time.*

*“Neal. Can you hear me? Remember this connection we have? Do you? Find me. Hear me Neal. If you've never heard me before....please hear me now. Remember what I told you. Are you close by? Do you even know that I am here? Remember Precious Time Neal.....remember. Rescue me....Neal.”*

*They drove north for five miles like the devil himself was chasing them and this was where they ended up. A dead end. Literally. They had gotten out of the car and they climbed on the roof looking at....nothing.*

*“No, no, no this isn't right! North! We went north!! Shit!!! There's nothing here!!!” Ross says as he looks out over the emptiness his hand shielding his eyes from the sun.*

*Neal puts his hand on Ross's arm. "Ross, remember when I talked to Steve that night he was kidnapped?"*

*"Yeah."*

*"He said precious time and rescue me. He said precious time and rescue....Ross we need a phone book!"*

*"There's a mom and pop place we passed...."*

*The second phone booth they checked reeked of cigarettes and beer and it was barely big enough for the two of them but at least it had a phone book, one of those big ones that had a plastic blue cover that hung from a chain that Ross was holding as Neal thumbed through the yellow pages.*

*"Neal fill me in here!" Ross says.*

*Neal gestures. "That night I talked to Steve he was giving me a clue, a hint! He was telling me where he was!"*

*"But precious time? What in the hell is that?" Ross asks.*

*"I don't know but I do know if Steve hadn't seen it he wouldn't have....oh shit!!!"*

*"What?"*

*"Ross I think I found it!"*

*"What is it? Neal?"*

*Neal smiles as he tears the page from the book. "....Wrong....!"*

*"Wrong? Who was wrong? Neal what in the hell....?" Ross says.*

*"Don't you see? I thought Steve was telling me to rescue him...."*

*Ross shakes his head. "He wasn't?"*

*"No....he was telling me the name of the street! He must have seen it wrong!"*

*"What's the name of the street?" Ross asks.*

*Neal shows Ross the page from the phone book. "Resurrection Blvd....rescue me...."*

*"Then what about precious time?" Ross asks.*

*Neal smiles again as he points to it.*

*"You can't be serious!" Ross says.*

*"As a heart attack!!! Let's go!"*

*“This is insane! There must be at least two hundred....no make that at least three hundred something units.” Ross says. “How are we going to find him?”*

*“How are we going to get in?” Neal asks as he holds the chain and padlock that secures the entrance gate.*

*“Precious Tyme Storage Facility go figure. Who in their right mind or left for that matter would name a storage facility Precious Tyme?”*

*Neal looks up at the razor wire. “Like it says on the sign man, ‘Store your precious belongings with us. A month at a tyme or a week at a tyme.’ We can’t go over and we can’t go under so that leaves one option.” Neal says as he holds up one finger.*

*“We go around....” They say at the same time.*

*They drove around and when they got to the corner they saw the same rusted out piece of car that Steve had seen that day still up against the fence. Neal parked the car next to the fence and they both used the car as a step ladder to climb carefully over the razor wire and down onto the roof of the other car. Once on the other side they jumped down to the ground.*

*“Let’s check out the office for some bolt cutters....” Neal says.*

*Ross was walking next to Neal when he reached out and put his hand on Neal’s arm to stop him. “Neal I think we have company.”*

*Neal turns his head and he looks behind them and sitting there a few feet back was a German Shepard.*

*“And there’s his partner....” Ross says as he looks at another dog sitting in front of them a few feet away.*

*“Shit! What do we do?” Neal asks as he continues to look behind him.*

*“Don’t look at them for one thing....”*

*Neal immediately looks at Ross. “....And what’s the other thing?”*

*“Don’t move....” Ross says. “Do you remember when I told you about my grandfather?”*

*“Ross this isn’t the time or place for a warm and fuzzy family remembrance....”*

*“No!” Ross grabs Neal’s wrist harder. “....My grandfather had a German Shepard....”*

*“....And....?!”*

*“He spoke to it in German!! Gave it commands in German.” Ross says.*

*“You’re telling me that you can give these dogs commands in German? So they don’t attack us?”*

*Ross makes a face. “In theory....”*

*“What?!” Neal says loudly and that causes the dogs to perk up their ears.*

*“Shhhh!!!” Ross says. “It’s been a long time I could either save us....or kill us.” Ross says as he looks Neal in the eyes. “Do you want to risk it?”*

*“Not really no but we can’t stand here all day.” Neal says.*

*“There is another option.” Ross says as he looks at him.*

*“I’m afraid to ask....”*

*“How do you feel about....heights?” Ross asks.*

*“Why?”*

*“Because we can’t go forward and we can’t go back the way we came...” Ross says.*

*“Yeah...”*

*“....But we can go up.” Ross says as he points to the roof.*

*Neal tilts his head back slightly just enough to see the roof line. “You’re serious?”*

*“We don’t have a choice....at least it’s a flat roof.”*

*“Can’t the dogs jump up there?” Neal asks.*

*“No I don’t think so...”*

*“You....don’t think so?” Neal asks.*

*“No. We go across the roof to the office....” Ross says.*

*“Then how do we get into the office from the roof?” Neal asks.*

*“Hell I don’t know I’m making this up as I go along!!*

*Neal makes a face. “Okay we go up top but how do we get up there?”*

*“I’ll help you up....” Ross says as he laces his fingers together to make a step.*

*“I thought you said that we can’t move and doesn’t that constitute moving?” Neal asks*

*“I meant we can’t run or make any sudden moves we have to move slowly....” Ross says as he slowly bends over holding his hands down so Neal can step into them. “But there is one thing...” Ross says as he looks up at Neal.*

*“And that would be what?”*

*“If something does happen and they come after us hit the ground and pull yourself into a tight ball and don’t move. Don’t make a sound. Got it?”*

*Neal looks at the dogs as he slowly puts his hands on Ross's shoulders. "Yeah I got it." Neal raises his foot slowly but then he stops when he catches movement out of his eye. The dogs have inched closer.*

*Neal puts his foot in Ross's hands.*

*"On the count of three...." Ross says. "One....two....three!"*

*Ross propels Neal upward and he grabs the edge of the roof and he pulls himself up and onto the roof and the second Neal's foot left Ross's hands the dogs charged.*

*"Neal!!!"*

*Ross yells as Neal leans over the roof and Ross grabs his hands and Neal finding strength that he didn't know that he had pulls Ross off his feet.*

*"Hang on!" Neal yells.*

*"Neal I can't! Pull me up.....!!!"*

*Neal pulls and Ross is able to get one hand on the roof to help pull himself up just enough so Neal can grab a hold of his belt from the back just as one of the dogs jump and grab a hold of his shoe.*

*"Neal!!!!"*

*By now Ross is half on and half off the roof with his legs dangling over the side. The dog who had his shoe managed to get it off of his foot and it was enough of a distraction that enabled Neal to pull Ross the rest of the way from the edge. After he does so they both lie on their backs breathing hard and looking up at the sky.*

*"I hope you weren't too attached to those shoes." Neal says.*

*"Not anymore no."*

*Neal sits up then he manages to get to his feet then he helps Ross up and they chance a look over the edge to see the two dogs having a tug of war with Ross's shoe.*

*Neal slaps Ross on the chest. "Come on...."*

*Neal gestures in the direction of the office and at first they start off walking and when they think they are far enough away from the dogs they run. They run across the roof skirting pipes and trash; now aware of the dogs down below that by now have figured out what they were doing, barking and running along the side of building keeping pace with them.*

*This storage facility was condemned and there was even a sign on the front gate stating that fact but Neal had no clue had badly the place actually was until they were running across the roof. He was in the lead, jumping and skipping over pipes and other debris that managed to find their way to the roof, the barking dogs echoing in his ears and then he looked back over his shoulder....*

*"Ross have you figured out yet how we....?"*

*Then Neal was gone in an instant. Ross was listening to Neal and the dogs concentrating on not tripping over something and the next thing he knew Neal was gone. Neal was running ahead of him and then a hole had opened up and swallowed him whole.*

*“Neal!!!”*

*Ross stopped running then he got on his hands and knees making his way slowly to the edge of the hole that had opened up in the roof. Neal had been the unlucky one and the heavier one to come across it and looking thru the hole down to the office below Ross sees Neal sprawled out on the floor of the bathroom. Neal was covered by plaster and shingles and other pieces of who knew what.*

*“Neal!!!” Ross yells again. “Are you alright?”*

*“You know I figured out how to get into the office from the roof!!” Neal says groaning as he sits up rather slowly.*

*“Are you hurt?”*

*Neal grimaces as he rubs his back. “No I think I landed on my pride. Holy shit that was quite a drop.” Neal says as he looks up then he sees the look on Ross’s face.*

*“What?”*

*“Neal....”*

*“What?!”*

*“Don’t move....”*

*“Don’t tell me....” Neal says.*

*“Right behind you....”*

*“Both...?” Neal asks.*

*“Yeah....”*

*“Do something Ross....”*

*“I have an idea....” Ross says.*

*“Shit I hate it when you say that!” Neal says as he looks up at him.*

*“I remembered some words my grandfather used....”*

*“Some words...?!” Neal says.*

*“Yeah....”*

*“Are they the right words Ross?” Neal asks.*

*“Should be....”*

*“Should be Ross?!”*

*“Aufenthalt! Liegen Sie unten!!” Ross says.*

*The dogs complied immediately by lying down.*

*Neal looks over his shoulder. “You did it!!”*

*“Yeah, yeah thank me later man. Just go and do whatever it is you’re going to do but....” Ross says.*

*Neal was in the act of getting up but he stops and he looks up at Ross. “What?”*

*“...Do it slowly!!”*

*Neal takes a deep breath and he gets up slowly and as he does so the dogs look at him. “Ross their in the way can you tell them to move?” Neal asks.*

*“You’re joking right? I barely remembered how to tell them to do that! Step over them!”*

*Neal looks up at Ross then he then looks at the dogs and he starts to move. Neal hugs the wall and as he gets closer to them they begin to growl. Neal stops.*

*“Ross!”*

*“Aufenthalt!!!” Ross repeats.*

*Neal starts to move again trying his best to become part of the wall. He steps over them then when he clears them he walks slowly over to the file cabinet. Neal grimaces as he opens each squeaky drawer of the file cabinet because every noise causes the dogs to look in his direction. On the roof looking down on the dogs is making Ross very nervous, sick to his stomach nervous. From where he is Ross can’t see what Neal is doing.*

*“Neal what is taking so long??”*

*“This file cabinet has six drawers! I have to look thru all of them and some of them.....!!!!  
Stick!! Oh shit!!!!”*

*“What happened?” Ross asks.*

*“Nothing.....I just cut myself....”*

*The dogs look in Neal’s direction. “Neal hurry up man!!!”*

*“Hey I found some bolt cutters and a screwdriver and a hammer!!!!” Neal says happily.*

*“Dandy!!! Now get the fuck out of there!!!”*

*Ross looks at the dogs at Neal comes into view behind them moving slowly towards the door and as he passes them they turn their heads to watch him. Neal makes it safely to the door and when he gets outside he makes sure that it is shut tightly then he leans against the door with his eyes closed breathing heavily.*

*“Hey!!!” Neal opens his eyes to see Ross’s head hanging down over the roof looking at him. “Help me down.”*

*“Count down Steve from a hundred and by the time you reach the end it will be all....over.” Who said that now Steve wondered? Oh he just did! Now that was just stupid. Whoever said that you see your life flashed before your eyes before you died were wrong....he hasn’t seen a damn thing. Even with the drug and his controlled breathing techniques he still had to use the oxygen that they had supplied for him and now he had just sucked the last oxygen molecule out of it. It was no good to him now. It was just now taking up space. Like he was. If only. If only he had told the people that he loved that he loved them more often....his mother. He hadn’t called her and he bets that she was worried about him. As was Marv. His grandparents. When Steve thought about it real hard who else did he have?*

*Don’t move he was telling himself. Movement caused oxygen to be used. Not an eyebrow or eyelash. Don’t move. Steve could hold his breath. Once he and Neal had a contest who could hold their breath the longest and naturally Steve had won. That almost made Steve laugh. Lightheaded. Suddenly he felt lightheaded....faint. At least she was right about something....that thief....it didn’t....hurt.*

*“Does it hurt?” Ross asks as he wraps Neal’s hand with a rag.*

*Neal winces. “No whatever gave you that idea? Where did you get that rag?”*

*“From the roof, why?”*

*“Because it’s filthy I could catch something....” Neal says as he looks the first-aid job.*

*“We’ve been all across the country on a wild guitar chase, had a gay guy hit on you, had guns pointed at us, you’ve been shot at, and not to mention the fact that we have been in danger of dogs ripping us apart and you....” Ross points at Neal. “....Are afraid of a little gangrene....”*

*“Yeah go figure man.” Neal says.*

*“What do we do with one bolt cutter?” Ross asks.*

*“We split up. You take the hammer and screw driver and you take those two back rows and I’ll take these....” Neal gestures behind him. “Bang on every door and if you find him, yell for me and I’ll come running.” Neal looks at his watch. “Jesus....”*

*“How long did all of that take us?”*

*“Too long.” Neal says as he walks away from Ross. “Too long.”*

*Neal took the closet set of storage rooms and the ones that weren’t locked he opened and the ones that were he used the bolt cutters to cut the locks off of them and then he opened them and so far nothing. Zip, zilch, zero. Nothing.*

*“Oh come on man why don’t you give it up....you know...he’s already dead.” That little voice in Neal’s head says.*

*“Shut up!” Neal says out loud to no one.*

*“Come on admit it....you don’t even like him.” The voice says again.*

*“Shut the fuck up!!!!” Neal says as he tries the next door and after he opens it he sees this one is empty as well. “Steve help me, help me to find you!”*

*“Oh come on Schon do I have to do everything for you??!”*

*Neal would recognize that voice anywhere and when Neal looked to his left he saw him standing there. Smiling, leaning against the building with his arms crossed over his chest.*

*“Steve?” Neal asks.*

*“You were expecting somebody else?”*

*“But how....?” Neal asks.*

*“Haven’t you ever heard of an out of body experience?” Steve asks.*

*“An out of body....but I thought that only happened when somebody....” Neal looks at him.*

*“Exactly....” Steve replies.*

*“Steve....”*

*Steve raises his hand. “Now don’t get all mushy on me. You wanted help to find me....so find me.”*

*Neal looks at the ground then back up at him. “But how, there are too many of these and not enough of me....”*

*“Use your head! Use your eyes and look! This place has been closed a long time it’s a free-standing rust bucket! Look for things that are shiny and new, shiny and new!!! Look for things that don’t belong....like me. I’m the key.....all you have to do....” Steve points at him.*

*“....Is find the lock!” They say at the same time.*

*“Bingo!!! But you better hurry....”*

*Then Steve was gone and so was Neal off and running checking all the padlocks on the doors, looking for the ones that didn’t fit. He ran passed the doors ignoring the rusty locks that had been there forever and when he got to the end of the row he turned the corner and started the process all over again.*

*Rusty, rusty, rusty, rusty and then shining like a light thru the darkness was a brand new lock, a brand new lock on a door of this free standing rust bucket to use Steve’s words. Neal reached out and he took it in his hand, he had to feel it, just to make sure that it was real. Then he put his hand up on the cool metal of the door and he banged on it hard.*

*“Steve!!! Steve!!! Hang on....all I have to do is pop this off and then....” Neal said as he used the bolt cutters on the lock and when it was cut off he pulled it off the door and he dropped the bolt cutters to the ground as he raised the door.*

*“Steve....?” After that Neal screamed.*

*Even though Ross was a few rows away he heard Neal scream and he took that as a good sign so he took off running.*

*“Neal! Neal did you find him....Neal?”*

*Neal was on his knees his dirty face streaked with tears. “He’s dead! Jesus god he’s dead!”*

*Ross looked in the storage room. “Neal it’s empty.”*

*“I know that!! Steve told me to look for shiny, shiny and new, shiny and new....”*

*“Neal I don’t understand, Steve told you but how...?”*

*Neal then got to his feet and he grabbed Ross by his shirt. “It can’t be too late!!! I won’t let it be too late! Shiny and new locks!! Look for shiny and new locks!!! Go that way!!!”*

*Neal points behind him and Ross not wasting anytime asking anymore questions takes off and Neal follows him with the bolt cutters. All the doors they passed had rusty padlocks until finally the last storage unit they come to....it had a brand new shiny one. Without hesitation Neal using the bolt cutters cuts through the lock and once it is off both of them raise the door to find....*

*“Neal it’s a....”*

*“It just a box.” Neal says as they go into the storage unit.*

*The box was huge and coffin shaped and it had three huge padlocks on it which Neal wasted no time in cutting off. When the last one was off Neal looked at Ross. “Are you ready?”*

*“Yeah....on the count of three. One....two....three.”*

*At three they opened the lid to the coffin shaped box and they had finally found Steve. He was intact, whole and he looked to be at peace. His eyes closed, his head turned to the side, his arms down at his side.*

*“Grab his legs.” Neal says to Ross.*

*Ross reaches into the box and he grabs a hold of Steve’s legs as Neal grabs him under the arms and they lift him out of the box and they lay him out on the floor.*

*“Steve! Steve!” Neal says as he slaps him across the face and for once Neal was glad for all of those first-aid classes Herbie made them take. All Neal had to do was glance at Ross and Ross knew exactly what Neal wanted him to do. Ross performed the chest compressions while Neal did the breathing.*

*“Steve!! You twit!! I won’t let you die! Do you hear me!! You owe me!!! Big time!! When I get the credit card bills for this....I’m sending them to you!!! Breathe damn it! Breathe!!!” Neal yells at him in between breathes.*

*“One one thousand, two one thousand, Neal....he’s gone....”*

*“No! No he isn’t!!! Don’t stop!!! Steve! Please....don’t....”*

*“Neal....” Ross says as he puts his hand on Neal’s shoulder. “We’re too late....”*

*Once again Neal covered Steve’s mouth with his and he blew hard and in the next minute Steve coughed.*

*Neal grabbed his hand then he moved his hair off of his forehead as Steve turned his head towards him. “Hey man welcome back.”*

*Steve coughed a few more times then Neal leaned over him. “That....better....not....have....been....a....tongue....I....felt....in....my....mouth.” Steve says slowly.*

*Neal laughs as he looks at Ross. “Always the fucking comedian.” Ross says.*

*“Ross?” Steve says as he tries to raise his head in Ross’s direction.*

*“Yeah man welcome back.” Ross takes his hand. “We thought you were gone.”*

*Neal gets behind him and he sits Steve up holding him in his arms which causes Steve to wince.*

*“Oh my chest, next time try go towards the light Steve.” Steve says.*

*“I hope there isn’t a next time.” Neal says.*

*“I’ll go and bring the car around.” Ross says as he gets up and he leaves.*

*Steve turns his head slightly to look at Neal. “When was the last time you brushed your teeth and you have a real bad case of dandruff....”*

*Neal laughs. “I fell through a roof and why is everybody always asking me when was the last time I brushed my teeth?”*

*“Oh I see been kissing somebody else have we?” Steve says he coughs.*

*“Just Ross....”*

*“Oh I forgot you have a thing for blondes.” Steve then sits up slightly and he grabs Neal’s arm. “Dogs, there’s big fucking dogs out there!!”*

*“No there isn’t we took care of them....”*

*That makes Steve relax resting his head against Neal’s chest. “You actually heard me....”*

*“Yeah I did....” Neal says.*

*Steve winces. “We’re alone so I guess I can say it....”*

*“You don’t have to....” Neal says.*

*“No I want to....I love you Neal and thanks.”*

*“I love you too Steve and you’re welcome.”*

*“What was in the guitar?” Steve asks.*

*“We can talk about that later....” Neal says as they hear a car approaching and in the next minute they see Ross.*

*“Ross you take one arm and I’ll get the other....easy.”*

*Neal takes Steve by one arm and Ross the other as they help him to his feet and Steve drapes his arms around their necks as they walk him out to the car.*

*“Ross can you drive my car back? It’s around here somewhere....”*

*“No problem....”*

*“Next stop will be the hospital....” Neal says.*

*“Guys you know there is nothing sexier than a chick wearing a ski mask toting a shotgun.” Steve says.*

*Neal and Ross both stop and they look at Steve. “Did he just say toting?”*

*“Yeah I think he did. A chick wearing a ski mask, where in the hell did that come from?” Neal asks.*

*“I’ll tell you guys later. This whole thing might not be a total lost we can probably write a song about it.” Steve says.*

*“And what would we call it?” Ross asks as they continue out of the storage unit to the car.*

*“There is nothing sexier than a chick wearing a ski mask toting a shotgun.” Neal and Steve both say at the same time.*

*“Sorry I asked. “ Ross says.*

*“I’m just glad that we’ll all here to laugh about it.” Neal says.*

*“Me too.” Ross says.*

*“No ones happier than me, let’s go home.” Steve says.*

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