

WALK A MILE WITH MY HIP

I am sure that everyone has heard the saying “walk a mile in my shoes” well this is based on that it just a little farther up the leg that’s all. Have you ever wished that somebody could go through what you have gone through just so that they would know? Well be careful what you wish for because you never know who might be listening.

+++++

Steve sat in stunned silence, gripping the arms of the chair so hard that his knuckles were turning white and he wasn’t sure that he had heard Neal right. No, he couldn’t have. Nobody in their right mind would say that. Nobody would have the balls to even think that let alone say it but then again Neal wasn’t just anybody.

“What did you just say?” Steve asks from his chair looking across the room at Neal who stood there with his arms crossed over his chest.

“You heard me Steve.” Neal replies.

To this Steve turns his head and he points to his right ear. “I have suddenly gone deaf in this ear so tell me....again!”

Neal exhales and he looks down at the floor. “We took a vote....”

“A vote?” Steve says as he struggles to push himself out of the chair then Neal crosses the room and he puts his hand out to help Steve and Steve just looks up at him and then his forehead wrinkles in anger as he slaps the hand away.

“I don’t need your fucking help!”

“Steve....” Neal says as he backs up.

“You guys took a fucking vote?” Steve says as he finally manages to get up from the chair and he approaches Neal. “How could you even vote on something like that?”

“You need to do the surgery.” Neal says matter-of-factly. “Do it now and get over with. We have a new album Steve, we need to tour in support of that album and if we don’t....”

Steve puts his hands up to his head as he limps away from him his face covered in pain. “I can’t believe this is happening! I can’t fucking believe my so called friends would make this decision for me! If we don’t....?” Steve looks back over his shoulder at him.

“Then Trial by Fire dies a premature death and it will be....”

Neal looks pointedly at him his eyes never leaving his face. Then the realization finally hits Steve, just the look in Neal’s eyes says it all. They are pushing him under the knife because of the bottom line, money, it is always about the fucking money. Steve turns suddenly and he knew right away that it was a bad move, a wrong posture because earlier his hip was just a dull ache but now it was screaming and he was almost brought to his knees by it, his eyes clouded over with tears and just at that moment Neal reaches out and he puts his hands on his arms to hold him up and their faces are just inches apart their eyes meet. “....And it will be my fault. Is that what you’re trying to say Neal?”

Steve had such a moment of clarity, both of them standing there, Steve looking in Neal’s eyes searching, searching for something, anything, that resembles compassion but in many ways Steve already knew the answer. “Don’t bother Neal I already know the answer, everything is always Perry’s fault, isn’t it Neal?”

“Steve....”

“....And what if I die a premature death?” Steve asks in the silence between them.

Neal shakes his head, “Steve....”

“See, I bet you didn’t think about that did you?” Steve says through clenched teeth.

“That won’t happen.” Neal says as he holds his arms tighter.

“Oh really and how in the fuck do you know, huh? Are you now suddenly psychic along with everything else? Steve reaches down into his pocket and he pulls out a medicine bottle but his hands are shaking so from the pain that he immediately drops it and for half a second they watch it as it bounces across the rug then Neal goes and picks it up and he hands it back to Steve.

“Let me get you some water.”

“Don’t bother.” Steve says as he opens the bottle and he shakes out two or three in his hand, Neal can’t tell which, then Steve takes them dry.

“Hey man you should be careful with those...” Neal says as he points.

“Oh now you show concern. It’s too late Neal.”

“Steve don’t be this way....”

Steve laughs then a sarcastic type of dry laugh with his hand on his chest. “Tell me Neal....” Steve says in between bouts of laughter. “....how should I be? How should I

act? Tell me what to say, you're the boss, right Neal. Tell me the truth, there was no vote, right Neal, you decided this on your own right?" Steve puts his finger on Neal's chest as he looks at him and Neal looks down at his finger.

"Back off Steve...."

"....Or you do what Neal? Huh? Beat me up, kick my ass, that would really look good you beating up on a gimp! Tell me the fucking truth!"

Neal takes a deep breath his fists clenching and unclenching and Neal thinks if Steve had only been healthy, wholly intact, with no blemishes, no defects then yeah, he would kick his ass all over this room but instead he slowly removes his finger from his chest and Neal takes a few well conceived steps back.

"You know how it works Steve, you know that we vote. Everybody has a fair say...."

"I didn't!" Steve protests as he points to himself.

"That isn't true!" Neal says as he points at him. "You already had your say! You told us how you wanted to wait! Wait for what exactly! Look at you, you can barely stand up! We can't wait on you Steve to find other options...."

Steve's eyes widen. "You're....you're giving me a fucking ultimatum Neal? Me?"

Neal takes a deep breath. "....You have to go to tomorrow...."

"....I HAVE TO?" Steve raises his voice.

"....You have to go tomorrow and make an appointment with your doctor, the surgeon...."

"....I HAVE TO?" Steve says louder this time.

Neal takes another deep breath. "....for the surgery and it has to be done...."

"....IT HAS TO BE DONE?"

"....In the next couple of weeks or so...." Neal says over Steve's loud protest.

Steve sees red and he is numb but he doesn't know if it is from the pain medication kicking in or from the realization that everything that he has ever worked for, everything that he has given to this band, all the blood, sweat and tears were now suddenly worth nothing. The pictures of everything and everybody that he had to give up to chase this musical dream of his ran though his head in a kaleidoscope of color and he never thought that it would end like this....end on a vote. End on an ultimatum. His blood was pounding in his ears, the sound like tires squealing on pavement, the

room became too warm for Steve as he stood there holding his ground his hands formed into fists. His eyes closed.

Steve would not believe this but for Neal this was hard, crippling, it was hard to stand here and watch his friend suffer. They knew something was wrong with Steve what with the pills, his many trips to many doctors to get many opinions but Steve was closed mouth. He kept his troubles to himself but this he couldn't keep to himself long, it was too telling and when he finally came clean to them they were all shocked. The pain that he had to be in but what was even worse was Steve's denial. He was told point blank by no less than two doctors that he needed hip replacement surgery but what did he chose to do? He decided to try other 'options' and that is what he called it 'options.' Neal knew Steve better than he knew himself in some cases and Neal knew that Steve was scared, terrified but Neal knew that sometimes that you just had to take a deep breath, light a candle and go on! They had work to do damn it! They had a schedule! They tried to reason with him, they tried to talk to him on numerous occasions but time was running out so they voted....and Neal was the messenger. Neal could hear Steve breathing, shallow, and even breaths as he stood there with his eyes closed.

"Screw you." Steve finally says.

"....Steve."

Steve opens his eyes and he looks at him. "Screw you and your ultimatums."

Steve takes a step towards him and he takes another and another and by now his meds have kicked in and he isn't limping but he is walking with a purpose and he is coming straight at Neal. Neal, by now doesn't care if Steve has a bum hip because if Steve hits him he will hit him back so Neal balls up his fists and he raises them but Steve does an extraordinary thing,

Steve veers off to his Neal's left and he heads straight for the front door and Steve reaches out for the doorknob and he turns it.

"If....you go out that door Perry all bets are off. Do you understand me? It will be over, you will be signing your own pink slip. Steve please, think about this." Neal says as he turns toward the front door.

Steve stands there at the front door his hand on the antique like brass door knob and he closes his eyes trying to fight back tears.

"Steve....I wish this could be different....I wish...."

Steve looks up at the ceiling then he looks back at the frosted glass in the door as he uses his coat sleeve to wipe the tears from his cheek and he has to clear his throat before he speaks.

“Neal do you know what I wish?”

Neal shakes his head as he rubs his eyes. “No Steve what do you wish?”

Steve once again looks back over his shoulder at him. “I wish that you could know what it is like....” Steve closes his eyes briefly. “....know what it is like....to be me for just a little while, know the pain I feel. Know the fear at the thought of that surgery, walk a mile with my hip and then see how quick you would be to make a decision, a life and death decision.”

Steve then pulls the door open and without hesitation he crosses over the threshold and he steps on the WELCOME mat on his way out. Neal walks to the door and he leans on the door jamb as he yells out to Steve who by now has made his way down the stairs and he was well on his way to his car that was parked in the drive.

“Steve let me call you a cab!”

Steve doesn’t even bother to answer he just shakes his head no as he pulls his keys out of his coat pocket and he unlocks the car door, opens it and he gets in.

“STEVE!”

Steve starts the car and he puts it into reverse and he gives it just a little too much gas because when he gets to the street the tires spin on the wet pavement as they try to find some traction and this for just a moment causes Steve to stop. By now Neal has come out of the house and he runs across the wet grass and he makes it to Steve’s car slipping and sliding across the pavement and when he reaches Steve’s car he bangs on the drivers window and Steve looks at him.

“Steve you shouldn’t be driving!” Neal has one hand on the driver’s door handle and the other is on the glass and Neal looks at Steve thru the rain droplets on the glass and he knows that just by the look on his face this was a mistake....a big mistake. Before this Neal could easily say that Steve would never, ever do anything like what Neal thought he was planning on doing but now he knew that Steve was capable of anything so Neal let go of the door handle but it was a millimeter too late because Steve had better reflexes and he had hit the gas. When Steve hit the gas once again the tires spun on the wet pavement and so did Neal. Neal was in danger if being dragged and if the pavement hadn’t been wet he would have surely been but the car’s rear end fishtail slightly and as it did so it knocked into Neal and he spun around as the car took off and he landed hard on the pavement on his left side and Steve drove off leaving him there.

Steve wasn’t aware of Neal until he was right at his driver’s door and then he turned to look at him, he could see the light rain glistening on his hair, his hand on the glass of the window and he heard his voice like it was coming from a tunnel.

“Steve you shouldn’t be driving!”

To Steve the words sounded hollow, dry and they came out of Neal’s mouth and they bounced off of the glass and before this Steve could easily say that he would never, ever do anything like what he was planning on doing but now Steve knew that he was capable of anything so Steve hit the gas. When Steve hit the gas once again the tires spun on the wet pavement and so did Neal. Neal was in danger if being dragged and if the pavement hadn’t been wet he would have surely been but the car’s rear end fishtail slightly and as it did so it knocked into Neal and from inside the car Steve heard and felt the thud as it made contact with Neal and when he looked in the rearview he could see Neal lying on the pavement and Steve drove off leaving him there.

*On a good day Steve lived 45 minutes from Neal and on a bad day an hour and today was a bad day. Soon after he left the drizzling mist that had been threatening Marin County all day had finally begun in earnest. It hit the windshield of Steve’s car with such force that he wipers were hard press to keep up with it and luckily it was late enough at night, it was now passed ten, and that Steve could take his time. When the meds kicked in he felt no pain for once and he was mellow so he propped his arm up on the door by the window and he drove with one hand the headlights illuminating the yellow stripe on the road and he vaguely remembered some warning somewhere that said **‘Don’t Operate Heavy Machinery, Don’t Consume Alcohol and Don’t Operate A Motor Vehicle. May Cause Drowsiness’** and he remembered that just as his eyes begin to slowly close. He reached down and he hit the button that lowered the window for some fresh air then he reached over and he turned on the radio to the loudest radio station that he could find and then he looked up into the rearview mirror and when he did he saw a pair of eyes looking back at him from the backseat.*

Steve cried out from sheer fear and panic and since his senses were dulled by the pain killers he hit the gas instead of the brakes and his reflexes were not as sharp as they were back at Neal’s house so when the car couldn’t negotiate the curve up ahead due to the slick road it was too late to try and turn out of it and besides his mind was a jumble and he couldn’t remember what you should do in the case of a spin so he held onto the steering wheel as the back end came around and he was facing the way that he had come just moments before. The road was deserted and it was a good thing because the car danced its way across both lanes and Steve felt like he was on a ride at the King’s County Fair and when gravity finally took hold again the car came to rest in a ditch the back end up against a tree.

Steve’s forehead was resting against the coolness of the steering wheel his eyes closed when at first the only sound he was aware of was the rain hitting the windshield then he heard the voice, unmistakably male, and to him it sounded miles away when in actuality it was coming from right next to him.

“Man, didn’t you read the warnings on this shit you could have gotten us killed.”

Steve eyes flew open and he sat up straight in the seat throwing himself against the driver's side door looking in the direction of the passenger seat. The only light came from a street light back out on the road and it was piss poor at best so Steve could only make out the eyes and the rest was in gloom except for his pill bottle that he held in his hand and that was only because the label was white. Then he leaned forward slightly in Steve's direction and Steve pressed himself up against the door even further until the arm rest was threatening to impale itself into Steve's back and then he could see more of him. He could see long dark hair, jeans, t-shirt and a blue jean jacket and this guy was skinny he hadn't seen anybody this skinny since....no it was crazy but damn if that jacket didn't look so familiar.

*"See, right here it says **'Don't Operate a Motor Vehicle. May Cause Drowsiness'** and look bucko it is even written in red." He looks up at Steve his bangs just pass his eyebrows the white of his eyes glowing in the darkness. "What's wrong Steve cat got your tongue?"*

Steve takes a deep breath. "What in the fuck are you doing in my car? Get out before I call the police." Steve reaches his hand down into his pocket to get his cell phone but of course it wasn't there.

"Looking for this?" He holds it up so Steve can see it.

"GET OUT OF MY FUCKING CAR!"

The guy in the passenger seat covers his ears. "Holy shit not so loud I am sitting right here! That is going to cost you." Then he reaches behind him and he opens the car door and he tosses the cell phone out into the night then he shuts the door behind him.

"Hey! You sorry son-of-a-bitch!"

He wags his finger at Steve. "That isn't very nice now."

"How in the hell did you get in my car? Get out now and walk away and I will forget all about this."

"Really? No police?" The man says.

"Yeah I swear no police just get out now."

"Do you have a wallet?" The man asks.

So this was about money and Steve wasn't surprised this guy looked like he could use some money. He was probably a junkie he was skinny enough but damn if he didn't seem....familiar.

"A wallet? Yeah, yeah I do."

Steve reaches into his back pocket and he takes out his wallet and he tosses it to him.

“Okay you got my wallet and my word now will you go?”

“Not so fast.” The man says as he opens the wallet and he thumbs through it. He looks at the credit cards and the cash then he did the most astonishing thing he reached behind him, opened the car door and he tossed the wallet out into the night along with the cell phone.

“Hey! You stupid bastard! There was a hundred dollars in that wallet, not to mention my driver’s license....”

“Boy oh boy you have really been hanging around Neal too long you sound just like him.” The man says.

Steve is silent for a moment then he says, “How do you know about Neal?”

“I know a lot about you and that is where I got into your car. Back at Neal’s house.”

Steve shakes his head, “That’s impossible the doors were locked.”

“Locked doors mean nothing to me.” The man says.

“Who are you? What are you? Some sort of new stalker?” Steve says and the man laughs.

“Oh man you really flatter yourself you know that and I know something else about you too.”

“What?” Steve asks.

“That you’re a liar.” The man says.

Steve is shocked. Steve can’t believe that this skinny ass kid got into his car somehow when he knows good and well that he locked the car, and he tossed his cell phone and his wallet out of the car and now this! This stranger had the sheer audacity to call him a....liar! Steve didn’t see a weapon and he had yet to produce one and Steve had a few pounds on him if he could just somehow....

“I’m....not....a....liar!”

“Oh really? Well let’s say, just for grins shall we, that I got out of this car and walk off into the night and the minute, no, the second I was out of sight you would haul ass out of this ditch and make for the first police station. Isn’t that what you were planning Steve? Hmmm?”

How did he know that? How did this guy know what he was planning to do?

“I...” Steve says.

“It doesn’t matter anyway because the minute the police sees this....” He holds up the medicine bottle. “They will think that you are some crazy rock singer high on drugs and then oh boy you will be in some trouble! Wait until the press gets a hold of that story! Then your career will be over! Ruined....!”

“No!” Steve says.

“You will be labeled a junkie!”

“NO! That isn’t true! I’m not....!”

“Hmmm let’s examine this more closely shall we? How many pills were in this bottle Steve? A 100? More? And now there are less than 50! Tsk....tsk....that isn’t good! That could be a problem developing don’t you think? Oh and by the way how could a gimp like you possibly KICK MY ASS?”

Steve was stunned how he knew that he had used that same word back at Neal’s house. This had to be some pain pill induced weirdness or it was a dream, more likely a nightmare. The product of too much stress, not enough sleep and how does he know what he is thinking or what he had said? He has to be....

“And no I’m not psychic.”

“What?” Steve says.

“Isn’t that what you were thinking Steve?” The man asks.

“I...” Steve couldn’t shake the feeling that he knew this guy. The more he talked the more he seemed eerily, creepily familiar to him. Steve rubs his face.

“Tired Steve?” The man asks.

Steve nods his head. “This is just too much. I have had a bad day and now this. I think I’m....hallucinating.”

“They voted you out didn’t they Steve?”

“Yeah something like that.” Steve says. “You know I think I have a headache. Maybe I should just crawl into the back seat and go to sleep and in the morning....”

The man laughs. "Oh no Steve you want to be awake for this. Don't you want to see what happens next? Well....don't ya?"

"You keep calling me Steve and I don't know your name."

There is a pause and all Steve can see is the white of his eyes. "Oh sure you do."

Steve shakes his head. "No, no I don't!"

"I've give you a hint. Are you ready?" The man asks.

"I'm not in the mood for riddles. Why don't you just tell me?" Steve replies.

"Oh what is the fun in that? Come on! Cross my heart and hope to spit it will be an easy hint. Trust me."

Steve has decided that this guy, whoever he might be was turning out to be annoying and he seem less sinister and a lot more crazy and Steve remembers reading somewhere that you should humor a crazy person so here goes.

"Okay what is the hint?" Steve asks.

The man leans even closer and he whispers to Steve. "My initials are S.R.P. isn't that....cool!"

"What....what did you just say?" Steve asks with more than a touch of disbelief.

"What's a matter Steve? Deaf in that right ear?"

"What....?" There he goes again Steve thinks.

"I said my initials are S.R.P." The man says again.

"Those can't be your initials." Steve replies.

"And why is that?" The man asks.

"Because....those....are....my....initials!"

"BINGO! DING! DING!" Steve jumps at his outburst. "Exactly! Your initials are mine initials because I....am....Stephen....Ray....Perry! Ha! Isn't that a killer diller!" The man reaches out and he slaps Steve on the leg and Steve flinches. "A younger version of course."

Steve is quiet trying to absorb all of this. He looks across the seat at the man in the semi gloom and he tilts his head to one side as the man does the exact same thing. The

man waits. Steve waits. This guy, this hitchhiker, this hanger on, this stalker wanna be is him? How is that possible? But in some ways it makes sense....oh my god did I just think that this whole crazy thing makes sense? Steve covers his eyes with his hands and he closes them and he counts to twenty hoping that when he opens them again he will be alone. When Steve gets to twenty he keeps his eyes covered but he opens his fingers to see....

The man waving at him. "What is this? Fucking Sesame Street? What am I suppose to say now? This lunatic fringe episode brought to you by the letter 'C' and 'C' stands for crazy?" The man brings his finger up to the side of his head and he moves it in a circle.

"When was I..." Steve asks.

"January 22 1949." The man answers.

"....And...." Steve asks.

"Kings County Hospital." The man answers.

"....How old was I....?" Steve asks.

"You were 16, in the back seat of HER car and her name was Julie." The man crosses his arms over his chest. "Another other questions?"

"....What about....?"

The man takes a deep breath. "Oh for shit sakes! Her name was Sherrie, you were together for five years, and you both did bad shit to each other! She thinks that she ruined you for other women and you...." The man points at Steve. "....still carry a torch for her and you aren't the fucking Statue of Liberty so put the torch OUT AND GET ON WITH YOUR LIFE! Still need more convincing? Turn on the overhead light."

"What....?" Steve asks.

"Try to keep up Steve okay. This fancy car has an overhead light doesn't it?"

Steve nods his head.

"Then go ahead and TURN IT ON!"

Steve hesitates.

"Go ahead, it won't hurt, I swear." The man says. "Come on, you know you want to. You're worried. Scared. You think I am just a figment of your wild imagination. Go on

Steve turn it on. I know what you're thinking....you're thinking if you turn on the light I will disappear! Poof! Like so much fairy dust. Afraid of the dark Steve? I will be right here even after the light is on. So go ahead....prove....me....wrong! You know how you love to be right." The man raises his eyebrows at him.

Damn if he wasn't right. He did think that if he turned on the light that this thing, guy, doppelganger, whatever he is would disappear. And damn if he wasn't right again but Steve did like to be....right. Steve glances over to his left at the panel of the car where the headlight switch was....all he had to do was turn it to the right, just a centimeter and BAM the overhead light would be on.

"When the headlights go out on the car and the overhead light comes on...." The man sings and Steve looks at him. "Pretty good huh?" The man smiles at him as he crosses his arms over his chest.

Steve takes a deep breath and he reaches his hand out to the headlight switch and he turns it a centimeter to the....right. The car was flooded with light and for a second Steve was blinded then when his eyes became adjusted he looked at the man in the passenger seat and it was true! It was him! Of course a much younger, cocky version. That damn long hair, those tight jeans, Nikes, t-shirt and a blue jean jacket. Steve rubs his eyes.

"HOLY SHIT!"

They both say at the same time.

"YOU'RE SO YOUNG!"

"YOU'RE SO OLD!"

They both point at each other. Then they both lean in closer. Then the younger Steve says "Wow! Is that all your own hair?"

The older Steve rolls his eyes. "Now that is an original question! Yes! This is all my own hair!"

"You look pretty damn good for being 50 something." The younger Steve says.

The older Steve's mouth drops open. "I AM NOT FIFTY SOMETHING I AM IN MY FORTIES THANK YOU SO VERY MUCH YOU LITTLE PRICK!"

"You know you just called yourself a little prick. You do realize that don't you?" The younger Steve says.

They both sit there in that car looking at one another. Studying, the older Steve looking at the younger Steve remembering when he actually looked like that.

“Can I....I mean....may I?” The older Steve asks.

“Yeah sure go ahead.” The younger Steve replies.

The older Steve raises his hand and he touches the younger Steve’s nose.

“Well I’ll be damned you are real!” The older Steve replies.

The younger Steve raises one finger. “Ah! Don’t say that too loud you never know who might be listening! What did you think Steve? That I was a myth?”

“You know you’re wearing all my favorite clothes.” The older Steve says.

The younger Steve looks down at himself then he grabs the front of the blue jean jacket. “I know.”

“How did I ever get into pants that small?” The older Steve asks as he shakes his head.

The younger Steve scratches his head. “You know you look....aarrgghh! What is the word I’m looking for?”

“Dapper?” The older Steve says.

“No.” The younger Steve shakes his head.

“Well dressed?” The older Steve says and to this the younger Steve shakes his head no as he taps one finger against his lips.

“Cosmopolitan?” The older Steve says.

“No.”

“Metropolitan?” The older Steve says.

The younger Steve shakes his head no as the older Steve taps his fingers on the dash of the car waiting impatiently. Then the younger Steve sits up straighter and his eyes widen then he snaps his fingers and he points at the older Steve as the older Steve leans in.

“....Lonely! Are you lonely Steve?”

The older Steve looks crestfallen as he sinks back against the driver’s door.

“What? Were you hoping for some sort of revelation?” The younger Steve asks as he shrugs his shoulders his hands up at his side. “So....are you lonely?”

“I suppose that everybody is at some point....” The older Steve says.

“Oh no! I am not talking about other people I am talking about you. You know....you have a knack for turning the conversation away from yourself.” The younger Steve says as he gestures with his hands. “Is there anybody waiting at home for you?”

The older Steve looks at him. “Just because there is no one waiting at home for me doesn’t me I don’t have....”

“Do you?” The younger Steve asks.

The older Steve waves his hands back and forth. “Wait! Wait! What is all this about? I can’t believe that I am sitting here talking to myself about myself!”

“Good point! Because if anybody was to drive by at this exact moment they would see you,” He points to the older Steve. “Talking to yourself because you are the only one that can see me. Isn’t that groovy?”

The older Steve scratches his head. “So....how is this possible? I mean how are you possible? What is the point....?” Then suddenly the older Steve sits up straight and his eyes widen and his hand covers his mouth as the younger Steve looks at him knowingly.

“OH MY GOD! OH MY GOD! I’M....!”

The younger Steve rubs his forehead. “No....you aren’t....”

“DEAD!” They both say at the same time as they look at one another.

“That’s it! I’m dead! I died in this car accident and you’re a....!”

The younger Steve leans over and he pinches the older Steve on his leg.

“OW! THAT HURT!” The older Steve says as he rubs his leg.

“Exactly! Will you just listen to yourself? If you were dead that wouldn’t hurt! And I am not an Angel!”

“Then what? How? Who? WHY?”

The younger Steve taps his chin in thought as he looks at the roof of the car.

“You know....” He then looks at the older Steve. “I could give you a long, dry, boring scientific reason such as....the planets were aligned just right!” He says as he points at

the sky and the older Steve follows his finger with his eyes. "Or....a black hole opened up in space and I took the mother ship down here or....better yet...."

"I'm possessed?" The older Steve says seriously as he grips his coat's lapels and this causes a great gale of laughter from the younger Steve. He leans over his forehead on the cool, leather seat his hands up on his chest as he laughs.

"I'M SERIOUS!"

The younger Steve then puts his hands on the older Steve's legs then he raises his head and he looks up at the older Steve as the older Steve once again presses his back against the door.

"Yes I know that you are serious that is what makes it even more funny! You are way too serious! There is nothing sinister, evil going on here....that is....at least where you are concerned."

"What does that mean?" The older Steve asks.

"....But....I can make my head spin around! Wanna see?" The younger Steve says as he suddenly sits up, one hand behind his neck, the other underneath his chin that pushes his head sideways.

The older Steve raises his hands. "No! No that is okay I trust you."

"Party pooper!" The younger Steve says.

"WELL!"

"Oh you want to know the reason?" The younger Steve leans in very close and he whispers. "Have you ever heard of the Genie in the bottle?"

The older Steve looks back at him. "I....isn't that where you let the genie out of the bottle and you get three wishes....?"

The younger Steve suddenly puts his hands on the older Steve's shoulders and he says at the top of lungs. "DING! DING! GIVE THAT MAN WHAT IS BEHIND DOOR NUMBER 3!"

The older Steve screws up his face and he says with just a touch of disbelief. "So....you're a....genie?"

"Well when you say it that way....I'm hurt." The younger Steve says.

"I'm sorry but you know when I think of a genie I think of...."

“....That chick on television right man?” The younger Steve says.

“Well you know....”

“No problemo.” Then the younger Steve suddenly sits crossed-legged on the seat, he then folds his arms up over his chest, just like that chick on television and he nods his head quickly and right before the older Steve’s eyes he changes into....Barbara Eden as Genie from the ‘I Dream of Genie’ show.

“Better?”

“Ah well....I don’t mean to be picky...” The older Steve says.

“Yes you do.”

“....But you may look like her but you still sound like....me....I mean....”

“I know what you mean.” He then snaps his fingers and he changes back into the young version of Steve.

“So....you’re a genie and I get three wishes?” The older Steve asks.

“Sort of, see you already made a wish and I am here to fulfill it.”

The older Steve gives him that look. “You mean....?”

The younger Steve points at him. “You got it!”

“No!” The older Steve says.

“Yes!” The younger Steve says as he claps his hands.

“You can do that?” The older Steve asks.

“Oh yeah!” The younger Steve says.

“But....but....but why me?” The older Steve asks.

The younger Steve tilts his head as he looks at the older Steve. “Why not you? Look at it as....cosmic retribution! Yeah! You know I like that! Cosmic retribution! You see Steve the odds were not in your favor, there was something missing from that math equation and I am here to level the playing field.”

“Okay....so how much will this....leveling cost me?” The older Steve asks.

“Oh you are cynical aren’t you?” The younger Steve says.

“Maybe....but I have learned that you don’t get something for nothing....there is always....”

“.... A CATCH?” They both say at the same time.

The young Steve laughs then as he points his finger at the older Steve.

“Well....well....Steve I must say that you found me out! There is just a teeny-weeny little....catch!”

Before the older Steve can blink an eye the younger Steve is practically in his lap, the younger Steve’s knees are between the older Steve’s legs and the younger Steve’s hands are up on the glass on either side of the older Steve’s head and their eyes meet. One of the older Steve’s hands is wrapped around the steering wheel while the other is gripping the headrest of the driver’s car seat.

“You see Steve for every ying there is a yang, for every closed door there is an open window, for every bad deed there is a good deed, it is a trade-off Steve. I do something for you and you do something for me....”

The older Steve swallows. “....And what would that be?”

“It is simple really....” The younger Steve runs his hand up and down the lapel of Steve’s coat then he looks the older Steve in the eyes again.

“I....want....to....be....human!”

“What....? Human? But why? I mean....you said yourself that you can be anything that you want so why would you....?” The older Steve asks.

“That is why. I have been everything, been everywhere, and done practically everything except that. I have fulfilled everybody’s wishes for centuries and now I have one of my own! All I need is one more....” He holds up one finger in front of the older Steve’s eyes. “....and yours is it bucko! When the wish reaches it conclusion, it’s end, when the final curtain drops down on the tableau then I will be like you....human! All we have to do is shake on it to seal the deal as it were....”

“What....what if I change my mind? Take back the wish?” The older Steve asks.

The younger Steve pouts. “Oh now Steve why would you do that? You get a chance that everybody dreams of! The opportunity to have someone walk a mile in your shoes; walk a mile in your skin; walk a mile with your....hip! And what is even better!” The younger Steve laughs. “It is going to be the one that has gotten your goat for years, the one that has been pulling your chain, the one that pisses you off, the one that makes you pull out that long hair of yours, the one that has made your life miserable on

numerous occasions, the one that made you make this wish, the one THAT VOTED YOU OUT!”

“....But....but it won’t change anything! It won’t heal my hip....it won’t make the pain go away....it wont....!”

“Ah!” The younger Steve holds up one finger again. “But it will give you the one thing that everybody wants...what you want Steve.”

“....And what would that be?” The older Steve asks.

As an answer the younger Steve snaps his fingers and suddenly the radio turns on it by itself and they heard the Rolling Stones singing....

“I can’t get no....satisfaction! I can’t get no....satisfaction!” The younger Steve snaps his fingers again and the radio turns off.

“Now old Mick Jagger there can’t get no satisfaction but you can. And don’t tell me that you don’t want to be satisfied Steve....everybody wants to be satisfied in some way....isn’t that right Steve?”

“I....what if I don’t shake?” The older Steve asks.

“Well you see in there lies the rub! If you don’t shake I am basically stuck here you see.” The younger Steve pokes the older Steve in his chest with his finger. “You brought me here....!”

The older Steve shakes his head. “I...I didn’t mean to....I....”

“Doesn’t matter I am here now and here I stay! I am attached to you....like white on rice....paper to glue....like....”

“All right all ready! I get the point!” The older Steve says as he waves his hands back and forth.

“This was your idea!” The younger Steve says.

“Yes I know!” The older Steve says.

“Well? I don’t have all day! We are burning daylight bucko! Time’s a wasting! My biological clock is ticking here!! TICK....TOCK! TICK....TOCK! TICK....TOCK! TICK....”

This was too much! Way too much! Tomorrow he will take his sorry ass back to his doctor’s and get some other pain pills because the side affects of these were way too

much! TOO MUCH! Wait no! After this he will swear off pain pills altogether instead he will try acupuncture....

***“TOCK! TICK....TOCK! TICK....TOCK! TICK....TOCK! TICK....TOCK!
TICK....TOCK! TICK....TOCK!...”***

The older Steve covers his ears and he closes his eyes. “STOP IT! STOP IT!”

The sound of the younger Steve’s voice was filling the car making it rock back and forth....

“TICK....TOCK! TICK....TOCK!”

The windows of the car were developing small fractures in them popping and cracking as they moved up through the glass....

“STOP IT! I CAN’T STAND IT! STOPPPPPPPPPPP!”

“TICK....TOCK! TICK....TOCK!” The younger Steve continued on in a sing-song type of voice as the glass that covered the gauges in the instrument panel exploded.

*“PLEASE! PLEASE! STOP IT!” The older Steve screams out in agony.
“TICK....TOCK! TICK....TOCK!”*

The overhead light explodes.

***“YOU KNOW HOW TO STOP IT STEVE! JUST DO IT! DO IT! DO IT! DO IT! DO IT!
IT! “TICK....TOCK! TICK....TOCK!”***

Steve was now afraid....no he was terrified. He could barely breath, his head was in danger of exploding along with all the glass in the car, he kept his eyes closed and somehow he managed to find the strength to move one of his hands from his ear. His lungs were burning, the pressure was immense, his arms and legs were shaking, he reached out with his right hand and the younger Steve....shook it.

The annoying sound of a car horn blowing incessantly is what woke Steve up and when he woke up he realized it was his own car horn and he was in his driveway of his house. Sitting in the driver’s seat. His head was pounding and his mouth felt like cotton. He covered his head with both hands and he looked around then he looked at the clock....it was midnight. Obviously he had fallen asleep in the car but....he reached his hand down to his coat pocket and he felt his cell phone in its usual place and the same with his wallet. Then he brought his right hand up to his face and he examined it. Then he looked around the car and he glanced up into the rearview mirror and he saw....nothing.

“Damn pain pills! Go to bed Steve go to bed.” Steve pulls the keys out of the ignition and he opens the door and he gets out making sure that the car door is locked then he walks to the front door, he unlocks it, then he goes in and he makes sure that he locks it behind him.

2.

Neal always knew that Steve could be a prick but what had happened the other night, well, that was a horse of a different color. Steve could have killed him pure and simple. Steve hit him with his car then he drove off, leaving him lying in the street, in the rain no less like a dog! Neal knew that he had landed hard on his left side but he had to get out of the street and it took some effort but he managed to get to his feet and he walked, limped back into his house and when he got there he went straight to the phone and he called Steve’s number. He knew that he wouldn’t be home yet so he left him a few chosen words on his answering machine. Then he grabbed a beer or two and he got into the hot tub hoping to stop any soreness or stiffness in his hip before it could get started.

Neal didn’t sleep well. It was a lot of factors actually. He and Steve, his hip, he and Steve, his hip, and he and Steve and no matter what position he tried to sleep in he hurt. When he got up the next morning he looked and he felt terrible and there was a bruise the size of Texas that covered his hip. Neal told himself that it was nothing, hell, he has had worse when he wrecked his motorcycle what was one more bruise? So he downed a couple of Tylenol, took a shower and he got ready for his day.

Neal got to the Journey’s offices and it was a huge, glass, encased monstrosity that had even taller palm trees in front of it, covered parking and a long curving walkway that lead to....something that Neal never really noticed before because it hadn’t been an issue before....until now.

It had to be the most massive set of stairs that Neal has ever seen that lead up to an office building anywhere and why he never noticed before....maybe because every time he came here before he negotiated them with no problem but now? Neal grabbed his guitar out of the back of the car and he slung it over his shoulder, he shut the car door behind him then he started across the parking lot to the stairs. At the bottom of the stairs, he hesitated, looking up one hand on the railing then he began to slowly climb and as he did so he felt a pull, just a stab of pain and he heard something else....a car. And it was a loud car with the motor racing so Neal looked back over his shoulder and when he saw the car his mouth dropped open.

Steve’s car roared into the parking lot just barely missing Neal’s car, a pole, a tree and it finally came to rest sideways in a parking spot. Neal watched as the door opened and Steve stuck one foot out, music blaring on the radio, he turned off the car and then Steve jumped out of it slamming the car door behind him. Steve looked well rested, well dressed and he was all smiles and humming as he bounded across the parking lot to the stairs.

“What in the fuck are you doing here?” Neal asked from the stairs as he pointed at him.

Steve stopped at the foot of the stairs then he tilted his head as he took off his sunglasses looking up at Neal.

“Where else would I be....Neal?” Steve replied as he begins to climb the stairs and when he got to the same stair as Neal he stopped. “Neal? Do you feel alright you look like shit! Didn’t sleep well?”

“You would know about that Perry! What in the hell are you doing here? Don’t you remember the talk we had last night?”

Steve smiles then he points his sunglasses at Neal. “Oh I was having a talk with somebody last night but she sure as hell didn’t look like you.”

“What?” Neal says with disbelief as Steve puts his sunglasses back on and he walks up a stair or two and Neal turns to watch him and as he does he grimaces and his hand goes to his hip. “You don’t remember what happened last night, with us?” Neal asks.

Steve smiles at Neal as he crosses his arms over his chest. “Neal I was having dinner with a very pretty woman last night and then after we went back to my place and....well I will let you figure it out from there. You should really get that looked at....” Steve says as he points to Neal’s left side. “....Oh and why don’t you use the back way?”

“The back way?” Neal replies as he watches Steve turn and sprint up the stairs then he remembered that Steve would use the back way because of his....and now he would have to use it because of his....and Steve doesn’t have to use it anymore because his....Neal watched Steve as he continued up the stairs then he turned around and he went back down to the stairs and he got back in his car and he drove around to the back way.

Neal was confused. Neal watched everybody making nicety-nice with Steve and it was like the last few days, the last few weeks had never happened. It seemed that everybody had forgotten their parts and they were adlibbing. Neal sat across the table from Steve, his hand on his chin, watching him. Watching him laugh and talk, acting normal, even when Neal knew that none of this was normal.

“Neal. Neal man, are you alright?” Ross asks him.

“What?” Neal asks startled. “Why is everybody asking me if I am alright? I am fine okay just fine!”

“It seemed like you blitzed out on us there for awhile.” Smitty said.

“Yeah Neal and Steve had an idea about the video.” Jon said.

*Neal sits-up a little straighter because he was suddenly having a bad case of deja-vu.
“Video, what video?”*

“For When You Love a Woman of course....Steve go ahead and tell him.” Jon says.

Steve rubs his hands together. “Well it’s very simple really; there will be an Orchestra, very stylish....” Steve goes on to explain the video and what everybody will do and when he finishes everybody looks at Neal.

“Well what do you think?” Steve asks.

“I....thought we already did the video.” Neal says.

Everybody suddenly begins to laugh. “Ah no Neal.” Ross says.

“But we....didn’t we....?” Neal says.

“Neal maybe you should go home you don’t look well.” Steve says as he sits back in his chair twiddling his thumbs.

Neal looks at everybody. “You know I think I will do that....I don’t feel....well.” Neal says as he looks at Steve.

“Yeah Neal I’ll call you later.” Jon says.

“Thanks.” Neal said half heartily as he got up and as he left the room everybody begin to talk among themselves again not even noticing that he was leaving.

If Neal had spent a restless night so did Steve but for a different reason. He felt he was being watched. So he went around to every door and every window and he made sure that they were locked and that the blinds and drapes were pulled shut, tightly shut and of course like he did when he was a kid, he turned the closet light on and left the door open just enough. Now he wishes that he had installed those fancy, ornamental wrought iron bars over the windows but at the time it struck him as being... too ostentatious....too....too paranoid.

“Yeah come on Steve you aren’t paranoid....not in the least little bit...”

Steve was saying to himself as he went around the house for the hundredth millionth time checking all the locks.

“Now I’m talking to myself.” Steve said out loud as he checks the window in the bathroom and this window doesn’t have a blind or a shade, it is round and heavily frosted and then he sees his pain medicine sitting on the counter. Steve suddenly realizes that the culprit was sitting right there in plain sight so he goes and he grabs the phone and he calls his doctor, never mind that it was late. Steve wanted an appointment for the morning and he got it. Steve decided to watch some television so he relaxed on the sofa and after half an hour he fell asleep.

The next morning Steve had a hard time separating himself from the sofa but finally he did and he took a shower, had some coffee and he went to his doctor’s appointment but an odd thing had happened while he was sitting in the doctor’s office, his hip, suddenly didn’t hurt anymore. He thought that it might be a fluke because he would have good days and bad days but none of his good days had been this good, it was like he never fell that day in Hawaii. With the change of pain prescription in hand Steve left the doctor’s office and he went to a place that he hadn’t been to in awhile, the beach. Before walking on the beach just a little was agony but now....it was experience that he didn’t realized that he had missed. Then Steve noticed another oddity, the fact that no where from the Journey Organization had called him, not even Irving and Steve knows that by now Neal had to have been to the offices and told them everything. Steve even checked his phone to make sure that it was on and it was. No matter, he didn’t dwell on it, he just got on with his day and the pain being absent made it even better.

Steve spent a wonderful day out and he returned home late in the afternoon and the minute he walked into the house he knew that something was amiss. It just felt different like somebody....then he heard it....the rustling from the kitchen. Steve glanced at the kitchen then he slowly made his way over to the fireplace where he picked up the poker then he started towards the kitchen.

“I know you’re in there! Get the fuck out of my house before I call the police!!” Steve says as he raises the poker.

“You are so predicable Perry!” The familiar voice said from the kitchen. “Let me see the next thing will be ‘How in the fuck did you get in my house? The doors were locked!’ blah, blah and blah!”

“What in the hell....?” Steve says as he goes into the kitchen.

And there stands the genie, still the younger version but wearing different jeans and a t-shirt eating a Popsicle. “You....ah weren’t thinking of using that were you?” The genie says as he points the Popsicle at the poker.

Steve lowers the poker. “What is that?”

“This? It’s a Popsicle.” The genie says.

“I know what it is where did you get it?” Steve asks.

“A real cool place called the grocery store. You should check it out. You know there wasn’t even a crumb in this place.”

Steve scratches his head. “You went to the grocery store, with what and how?”

“With what and how?” The genie repeats.

Steve goes around and he opens the pantry and it is stocked with all kinds of food and so are the cabinets.

“Don’t worry I got everything you like.” The genie says.

“I see...” Steve says as he holds a bottle of Olive Oil. “How did you pay for this? You don’t have money, do you?” Steve asks.

“No but you do.”

Steve looks over his shoulder at him. “Me?”

“Yeah you.” The genie says as he pulls a credit card out of his back pocket. “American Express....don’t leave home without it!” He says as he holds it up. Steve puts down the bottle and he crosses the room and he takes the credit card out of his hand.

“This is mine! How did you....?” Steve asks.

“You know they are really friendly at that store....they were practically falling all over themselves to help me, I mean you. They even took my groceries out to the car....”

“Car?” Steve says.

“Yeah you know that thing that has four wheels....”

“Stop it! You were impersonating....me? I thought you said that only I could see you.”

“Well yeah....sort of....I have the power to bend men’s mind, cloud their vision, and make them think they are seeing one thing when in fact....” The genie says.

“You’re the fucking Shadow.” Steve says.

The genie eats the rest of the Popsicle. “Hmmm that was a great radio show!”

“What are you doing here?” Steve asks.

The genie brushes pass Steve and he goes into the living room. "This is a great place, a lot of room, great views, quiet; I think I will be very happy here."

"Wait, did you just say that you will be happy....here?" Steve says.

"Uh huh." The genie says.

Steve laughs. "You aren't....you can't....you won't be....living here!" Steve says.

"Oh yes I am! I mean, you said that you were lonely...."

"No....I didn't say that you did!" Steve says as he points at the genie.

"I am living here until the wish is fulfilled and you summoned me...." The genie points to Steve. "....so that makes you my....master!" The genie smiles. "Isn't that cool!"

"You're....you're....?" Steve says.

"Your wish is my command!" The genie says as he bows.

"Don't do that! You didn't say anything about the ah....ah....master thing."

"I may have failed to mention that part. Well, what do you expect? You brought me here!"

"I know...." Steve says.

"This was your idea....!" The genie says.

"I know....but I didn't expect you to move in! I thought I had made you up....I thought I had been hallucinating....none of this is....REAL!" Steve says.

The genie moves closer to Steve. "Oh yes it is real....how does your hip feel? Huh...?" The genie asks as he tilts his head. "Huh Steve how does it....feel?"

Steve looks at him. "Like it never...."

"....happened?" The genie says.

"Yeah something like that." Steve says. "Neal....?"

The genie nods his head. "Funny you should mention him....he is a piece of work....he left a very rude message on your answering machine."

Steve looks over at the machine. "You listened to my messages?"

“Well yeah man! That is part of my job! It is my job to protect you....” The genie says.

“Protect me?” Steve says.

“Yeah....vitamins. Steve do you take vitamins?” The genie asks.

“Vitamins? Wait....what does that....back to Neal! Neal has my bad hip? That is why it doesn’t hurt right?”

“Duh! Yeah....you made that wish. The wish to have him know what it is like to have your bad hip....pain and all....so now he is.”

“How far will it go....I mean?” Steve asks.

“Well you see that is the beauty of this whole thing! That depends on Neal...if he plays nice....it will be over quick. Personality I hope this drags on a while....I need to study.”

“Study?” Steve asks.

“Yeah study, I need to study so I know how to be human. Watch, observe, read, that sort of thing.”

Steve scratches his head and the genie points his finger at him and he smiles. “Do I detect some trepidation on your part there Steve? Huh do I...? Don’t worry, I know about your privacy and how you covet it, desire it, I know how hard you work to maintain it so this is for you....” The genie pulls a folded document out of his back pocket and he hands it to Steve. “Go ahead....take it.”

Steve doesn’t want to but he finds himself doing it anyway. He opens it and he reads it....”This is a....” Steve says surprised.

“Yeah buddy a Non-Disclosure Agreement....don’t worry it is all binding and legal. Why are you so surprised there....don’t you have everybody that works for you sign one of those?” The genie looks at him his arms folded over his chest.

Steve glances up at him over the paper. “You don’t work for me.”

“No? Well that is interesting Master....”

Steve holds up one hand. “Don’t call me....that!”

“Why? You are you know....my Master I mean....” The genie states matter-of-factly.

“Don’t say that....it sounds....!” Steve says.

The genie's eyes widen and then he begins to laugh. "Oh! You mean the gay thing? Oh don't worry your handsome head about that....I'm not interested in you....THAT WAY....although...." The genie says as he taps his finger against his lips.

"Although what?" Steve asks worried.

"In the past I have been lovers with many of my masters....mistresses, what-have-you....you know I can be anything, anybody that you like." The genie walks around Steve still tapping his finger against his lips his eyebrows knitted together in thought then he snaps his fingers. "I bet you like the intelligent type, they can be really pretty but not beautiful, personality is more important to you, you like good conversations, and you want them to like you for you not the rock-star Steve. You like then to have a nice figure, maybe a little on the athletic side, about your height or so, and you are a...." The genie snaps his fingers again. "...Leg man. And you like them to be....brunette. Am I right so far?"

Steve's mouth drops open and all he can do is nod his head yes.

"Okey dokey well let's see how you feel about this." The genie then snaps his fingers three times and there is a flash and then standing there in the genie's place is the kind of woman that the genie described. The genie stands there with her hands on her hips.

"Well....how's this?" The genie asks as Steve walks around her.

"Wow that is really....amazing!" Steve exclaims.

"Is that the best you can do? Amazing? I mean do you have any idea how much energy it takes to do this?"

Steve continues to walk around and he laughs. "I am....speechless! Totally speechless....!"

"Thanks that's better." The genie says.

"How long can you stay like that and....?" Steve asks.

The genie crosses her arms over her chest. "As long as you like and the answer to your question is....I am a female in everyway."

"In everyway?" Steve asks.

"Uh huh." The genie answers bored examining her nails. "Ewww I need a manicure....in everyway....PMS included at no additional charge."

Steve finally comes to his senses as he covers his head with his hands and he turns away from her/him.

"I can't believe that I am actually thinking of....turn back now!"

"Why? I mean....Stevie old boy wouldn't it make more sense if the neighbors saw a woman here....I know this is San Francisco and all...."

Steve looks back over his shoulder. "The....the neighbors?" Steve then goes over and he pulls down the shades at the living room windows.

"Yeah you know....neighbors. The people that live in those other houses around you....N.E.I.G.H.B.O.R.S! I know...." The genie snaps her fingers. "Tell them I am your cousin!"

"My....my cousin?" Steve says.

"Oh what....too hillbilly? Okay....okay....just tell everybody that I am your girlfriend, babe....you know the usual. Besides, it has been awhile, hasn't it, I mean....since you....you know....had sex right?"

Steve feels his face turn red. "That isn't any of your business."

The genie takes a deep breath. "Okay fine whatever, you are human you know, there is nothing wrong with a little slap tickle...."

"Okay stop it...." Steve says.

"....a game of hide the sausage...." The genie says.

"Stop it..." Steve says again.

"....Everybody likes a little ass...." The genie continues.

"I SAID SHUT UP!" Steve says very loudly.

"....But nobody likes a smart ass...." The genie says and then the genie's bottom lip begins to quiver, tears well up in her eyes and then she begins to cry. A loud, crying sob, she covers her face with her hands. "You....you yelled at me!"

From across the room Steve's manly side suddenly kicks in and for just a minute he forgets....tears.....are his downfall. He looks at the carpet then the ceiling and still the genie cries.

"You're....you're mad at me!"

*Steve crosses the room and he does a strange thing he puts his arms around her....
"No, no I'm not. I'm sorry I didn't mean to yell...."*

Then the genie looks up at him and without Steve even noticing the genie has changed back to his old self....a younger version of him.

“Gotcha!” The genie says as he laughs and then Steve suddenly pushes him away.

“See how easy that was.” The genie says.

“That wasn’t funny.” Steve says.

“No? But it proved a point didn’t it? If you ever want....all I have to do is snap my fingers....” He holds his fingers up and he tilts his head. “....And don’t worry I have had all my shots....I am healthy and disease free....you were thinking that....right?”

“Is there some way to turn that feature off? I mean do you have a mute button?”

The genie smiles and he holds his arms out to his side. “All you have to do is ask....Master.”

Steve crosses his arms over his chest. “Okay I want...”

“What....?” The genie leans in closer his right hand covering his right ear.

“Could you please....” Steve tries again.

“I can’t hear you....” The genie says still with his hand covering his ear.

“I command you to stop reading my mind!” Steve finally manages to say.

The genie simply smiles as he brings his hands in front of him and he bows. “Your wish....is my command.” Then he snaps his fingers. “It is done then. See, now that didn’t hurt did it?”

Steve leans on the fireplace as he rubs his forehead. “You know I think I am going to go and lie down....all of this is just....” Steve says as he heads towards the bedroom.

“Great idea! You rest and when dinner is ready I will let you know.” The genie says.

That causes Steve to stop. “You cook dinner?”

“Oh yeah, breakfast, lunch and dinner. I can fix anything you want, from the everyday cuisine to gourmet....so what would you like for dinner...Master?”

“Surprise me...” Steve says as he continues on to the bedroom.

“Ah....Master you know you might find some changes in there....” The genie says to Steve.

Steve ignores him as he opens the door and he goes in and he stops in the middle of the room. The bedroom had been completely rearranged.

“What in the hell....? Steve says as the genie comes into the room.

“It’s called Feng Shui....” The genie says.

“Feng what?” Steve asks.

“....Shui. Oh I forgot that it hasn’t caught on here yet, well, just wait a few years and it will.” The genie says as he goes over and he sits on the bed then he lies down. “Feng Shui is from China, they have been practicing Feng Shui over there for, oh my gosh, centuries. It is the study of energy from Heaven and Earth to see how they affect the lives of people, it also about perfect balance and harmony. This arrangement is a lot better for your balance and health, I even flipped the mattress for you. Anyway, there was a draft over there.” The genie points to the other side of the room. Bad for your chords.”

“Thanks.” Steve says.

“Wow this is a very comfortable bed.” The genie says as he leans back against the pillows his hands behind his head.

“I don’t want to sound ungrateful but could you know....my nap.” Steve says.

“Oh! Oh yeah, hey no problem. You know if you want some company all I have to do....” The genie raises his hand.

Steve raises his hands to stop him. “Ah....no that is alright I am used to sleeping alone.”

The genie gets off of the bed and Steve notices that he didn’t leave any impression.

“You know, that strikes me as being rather....sad. No one should get used to that....especially a guy like you.” The genie says as he heads for the door and Steve was still looking at the bed.

“Oh by the way where will you....?”

“The attic. It is just perfect for my needs.” The genie says.

“The attic? But the attic isn’t even....oh never mind.” Steve says.

The genie raises his finger and he points it at Steve. “See you’re catching on....have a good nap....Master. “The genie says as he exits the bedroom shutting the door behind him.

3

While Steve was getting used to his new house guest Neal was having technical difficulties of his own. The last couple of days Neal’s home life had gone to hell along with his hip he was doing his best to ignore it but he soon came to find out that it was interfering with a lot more than his walking. Neal had come home one day to find that his girlfriend had moved out of their bedroom and into the guest one and Neal knew from experience that was the next to the last stop before she was out the front door.

“Hey! Amy what are you doing?” Neal asks as he stands in the shambles of what was once their bedroom.

“I am moving into the guest room.” Amy says as she grabs her stuff out of the bathroom and she takes it into the bedroom with Neal following right after her.

“But why? What in the fuck is going on?”

Neal was right behind her and she didn’t even make it into the bathroom she throw her stuff on the bed and she turned on Neal so quick that Neal had no place to go. Amy slammed into him so hard that his hip screamed out of protest and he had to bite his lip from crying out as he grabbed her by her arms.

“This is the most that you have touched me in days Neal!” Amy says.

“What are you....?” Neal asks.

“We used to make love all the time, remember Neal?” Amy says angrily.

“Well yeah I....” Neal tries to say.

“Who is she?” Amy spits out as she pushes Neal back.

“Who is who?” Neal asks confused.

“Don’t play dumb with me! That little slut that you are sleeping with!”

“I....what?! No Amy I’m not....I’m not sleeping with anybody else! I swear!”

“Oh you swear!” Amy points at him as she flips her hair over her shoulder. “I think you’re lying!”

“Amy! Holy shit I love you!”

“Oh bullshit you don’t love anybody but yourself and your music!”

Now Neal gets mad. “That isn’t fair!”

“I am only going to stay here until I find another place to live and then....” Amy turns around from him then and Neal tries to stop himself but he can’t it is like he is watching someone else as he grabs her by the arm and he spins her back around to face him.

“Neal!” Amy says surprised with just a touch of fear.

“I love you Amy and I am not, I repeat, I am not having an affair!”

“Then what Neal? What is it? Oh I get it....” She says sarcastically. “It’s Journey again and the guys and the stress and probably Steve fucking Perry....!”

“IT’S MY HIP.....!!!” Neal says loudly.

“Your hip? What about your hip?” Amy asks then Neal lets her go.

“Remember the other night when I told you that Steve was over here for that meeting?” Neal asks.

“Yeah....”

“Well I didn’t tell you....everything. When Steve left, he shouldn’t have been driving Amy, I tried to stop him and he hit me with his car.”

Amy’s eyes widen and she covers her mouth with her hands as she inhales sharply.

“He hit you with his car? Did you call the police?”

“No....” Neal says.

“But you should have....” Amy says.

“No, no it wasn’t....anyway....I landed on my hip and I think I did something to it....” Neal finally admitted it out loud.

“What do you mean something?” Amy asks.

“I...I don't really know I just know that it hurts and I can't do the things that I did before....” Neal says.

“Why didn't you tell me this before Neal? You should go to the doctor.....”

“I think Steve put a curse on me.” Neal says seriously.

Amy tries not to laugh but she can't help it. “A what? A curse? You think Steve put a curse on you? Neal! That is just fucking silly!”

*“No, no Amy it's the truth! The day after it happened I saw Steve at the office....”
“I thought you fired him or something....?”*

“I did....we did....but he was there! Running up those stairs in front of that building! Amy there has to be a hundred damn stairs there and Steve was running up those fucking stairs like he was....was a fucking teenager again! Like he was brand new....! He did this to me!”

“Neal....I know that you and Steve have had your differences but he didn't put any kind of curse on you. He hit you with his car....”

Then Neal suddenly remembered. It was like a switch going off in his head, his eyes widen and he puts both of his hands on the top of his head.

“Neal what is it....?”

“Oh that prick! That son-of-a....!”

“What?”

“It was a wish!” Neal says.

“A wish? I don't understand.” Amy says as she shakes her head and Neal once again grabs her.

“Don't you get it? A wish! He made a fucking wish and somehow it....I have to go!” Neal says as he leaves the bedroom and he goes to the closet and he gets out his jacket with Amy close behind.

“Go where? Neal where are you going? You're scaring me!”

Neal then puts his arms around her and he kisses her. “Don't be scared, I'm going to fix this.”

“But how I don't understand....?” Amy says near tears.

“I don’t either just don’t leave, okay?”

She nods her head as she watches Neal cross the living room then as he heads out the door.

Steve was in the kitchen when it first started with the knocking and then with the doorbell ringing. And it ended with Neal banging on the door and yelling. “Perry! You prick! I know you’re in there! Open this damn door!”

“Neal! Watch your language there are kids....! Steve starts to say but he doesn’t finish because he barely had the door opened when Neal pushes his way in, almost knocking Steve on his ass.

“I don’t give a fuck about the kids!” Neal says as he slams the door so hard the windows rattle and Steve stumbles back and just before the back of Steve’s legs hit the coffee table Neal reaches out and he grabs the front of Steve’s shirt and he pulls him hard toward him, normally with Neal’s bad hip all this activity would be impossible but Neal was so angry by this point that the adrenaline rush was what was driving him on and not to mention a good-sized hit of revenge.

Neal had grabbed Steve with such force that Steve thought that he would have whiplash and out of instinct he grabbed a hold of Neal’s wrists.

“You no good son-of-a-bitch!” Neal says as he gives Steve a good hard shake. “I want you to call it off! End it! Right now!”

“I...I....don’t know what you’re talking....!”

Neal shakes him again. “Yes you do know what I’m talking about! The wish! I want you to take it back! Rewind it! Call it off now!”

“It wasn’t me I swear!” Steve says.

Neal laughs. “Liar! I know it was you who else would it be?”

“Well Neal you got me by the short hairs now don’t ya....?” Steve says slowly. “You were almost right....”

“What? What does that mean?” Neal asks.

“It was Steve’s wish but I’m the one who’s doing all the work!!” The genie says angrily.

By now Neal’s anger is just about gone and confusion has set in and riding piggy-back is fear. Neal loosens his grip and he wants to run, leave, but Steve has a death grip on his wrists and he never knew that Steve could be so strong.

“Who....who are you?”

“Oh I thought you would never ask! Allow me to introduce myself!”

The genie snaps his fingers and right before Neal’s eyes there was a sudden flash that blinded him momentarily and when Neal’s eyes finally adjusted standing there was the younger version of Steve, long hair, jeans and a t-shirt that read ‘Whose Your Genie?’

“WHAT IN THE FUCK!” Neal says as his eyes widen as the genie’s hand moved up to Neal’s neck and Neal found himself elevated his feet kicking against nothing but air and then the wind was knocked out of him as the genie backed him into the wall.

“I am your worse nightmare coming to call, I am the thing that hides under your bed....” Neal kicks his feet as he gasps for air. “I am the granter of wishes....!”

“I....I....can’t breathe!” Neal manages say thru semi-blue lips.

“Ah poor baby and did I mention that you need your mouth washed out with soap! Besides you know how my Master feels about people showing up....uninvited!”

This thing, this Granter of Wishes, was strong and Neal was in danger of passing out. It would have been funny if it wasn’t....surreal. Here was Neal being held aloft, pinned up against the wall, at least a good five feet from the floor, looking down at a baby-faced, innocent, very meek and mild Steve but then again it wasn’t....Steve.

“Say you’re sorry!” The genie says but Neal hesitates and the genie gives his head a good whack against the wall. “SAY IT!”

Neal whimpers and he closes his eyes. “I’m....I’m sorry!”

“I can’t hear you!” The genie says.

Neal swallows. “I’M SORRY!”

The genie smiles an evil smile. “That’s better! Now would you like to be down? Hmm?”

Neal closes his eyes and he nods.

“I didn’t hear the magic word....Neal?”

It is all Neal can do to stay conscience let alone speak. “P....please!”

“Good boy!” The genie opens his hand and Neal hits the floor with a thud and when he does he lets out a yelp of pain. Then Neal’s hands go to his throat as he takes in great gulps of air which in turn causes him to cough.

“Oh come on Neal! BUCK UP!” The genie says as he squats down in front of Neal hitting him on the leg. “Isn’t that what you told Steve about his hip? Hmmm was it? WASN’T IT!”

Neal shies away from him raising his arm in front of his face. “How do you know about that....?”

The genie laughs. “Oh Neal I know a lot about you....and because I do know a lot about you I can’t figure out why Steve would have such....compassion for someone who has none for him?”

“I...I don’t understand....” Neal says.

“Oh....of course you don’t. Steve asked me how far this would go and do you know what I told him....?”

Neal shakes his head.

“I told him that it depended on....you!” The genie points at Neal. “....And I told him that if you played nice then I would go....easy.” The genie says as he runs his finger up Neal’s leg and he flinches.

“What....what do you want me to do? Apologize? Say....I’m sorry? Kiss Perry’s ass? What!”

“Neal! Tsk....tsk....tsk!” The genie says as he wags his finger at Neal. I can always count on you to be a smart ass....if you had done what you were suppose to have done in the first place then I wouldn’t be here!”

“What was I suppose to have done?” Neal asks.

“....Waited. If you would have done that one selfless act then this whole thing wouldn’t be happening but oh no! You have to be greedy!”

Neal tries to sit-up. “No....I’m not greedy! You....you don’t understand the music business....!”

The genie then stands up over Neal and he points his finger at him. “And you don’t understand the concept of ‘don’t bite the hand that feeds you’! What about ‘don’t mess with a good thing?’ and my all time personal favorite ‘if it ain’t broke don’t fix it!’” The genie says in his best Texas accent.

Neal looks up at him. "Screw you!"

The genie starts to laugh and he laughs so hard that he cries. "Oh Neal! Screw me? "The genie says as he wipes his eyes. "Screw me?" The genie then puts his hands on his knees as he bends over to look at Neal. "That would worry me some if you could....GET IT UP!"

Neal was over his initial shock of being scared and now he was back to being highly pissed so he raised his good leg and he was just about ready to give this guy a good hard knee right in his family's jewels when he suddenly....disappeared, Neal sat up and he looked around the room and ever so slowly he was able to stand up and he was making his way across the living room to the front door, Neal looked back over his shoulder and when he looked back around the genie was standing in front of the door. Neal jumps.

"Ah....leaving so soon Neal, just when I thought we were getting along so well. I want to know you better, what makes you so special! Don't you want to get to know me better?"

Neal shakes his head back and forth. "No not really."

"No? Well guess what? You will. You will know me like the back of your hand..." The genie pushes Neal backwards slowly. "...Neal....have you ever heard the saying 'This will hurt me more than it will hurt you'" The genie asks as he continues to push Neal backwards.

"I....yeah....sure...." Neal replies.

"IT'S A LIE! Have a seat Neal!" The genie gives Neal a good hard shove and he falls back into a leather chair that wasn't there a second earlier. Then the genie leans on the arms of the chairs as he leans down closer to Neal.

"Fasten your seat belt Neal you're in for a bumpy, bumpy ride!" Then the genie raises his hand....

"What....what are you going to do?" Neal asks with a tremor of fear in his voice as his eyes follow his hand.

"Oh don't worry....this will hurt you more....than it will hurt me!" The genie then snaps his fingers.....

Neal feels the hand on his shoulder as he covers his eyes then he slowly moves his hands and he sees the leather chair that he is sitting in, then he looks to his left and he

sees the hand, then the long white sleeve of the lab coat then still farther till he sees the face of his doctor.

“Neal are you all right?”

Neal looks confused. “I....guess....I don’t know....”

“I know this is a shock....” The doctor says. “You can always get a second opinion....hip surgery....”

Neal finally wakes up. “Wait!” Neal sits up straighter in the chair. “Did you say hip surgery?”

The doctor sits on the edge of his desk. “It is a very evasive procedure, a long surgery and in some cases a long, difficult recovery and you are entitled to get a second opinion but Neal things of this nature don’t respond well to....”

At this moment Neal heard himself channeling Steve “I want to get a second opinion and maybe explore other....options before I....”

*“I understand, I’ll give you the names of a few other doctors that you should see....”
The doctor hands Neal’s the names.*

4

Steve couldn’t really say at what time that it stopped being....well odd. Not too many people had a frigging genie living in their attic but that, if you can believe it wasn’t the odd part. The odd part was that Steve was used to him being there, he liked the fact that somebody was there to keep an eye on the place and he looked forward to....what exactly? The next thought scared Steve because he actually looked forward to seeing him but then again Steve had a lot of good friends that he looked forward to seeing....yeah sure they didn’t live in his attic....and they couldn’t change their shape at will and they couldn’t grant wishes and they....wait! Did he just refer to him as a ‘good friend?’ When did that happened? Driving and thinking was a dangerous thing for Steve because he lost all track of time and before he knew it he was at home.

Dinner was in the oven and whatever it was smelled great and when Steve stepped around the corner into the living room it looked like a book store or the Central Library had exploded. There were books everywhere, hardbacks, paperbacks, all stacked neatly on the sofa and the coffee table and on the floor and there sitting in the middle of them all was the genie, reading. Sitting crossed-legged on the floor absorbed in his reading and it was a big book that he was reading. Steve picks up a near-by book and he looks at it.

“You’re reading the encyclopedia?” Steve asks.

The genie looks up at him as he brushes the bangs out of his eyes. “Doesn’t everybody?”

Steve laughs. “No. I can’t wait to see my credit card bill.” Steve says as he puts the book back on the stack.

“Oh....I didn’t buy all of these.” The genie says.

“You didn’t buy....so you stole them?” Steve asks.

“Oh no....” The genie stands up and he stretches. “I just borrowed them.”

Steve looks around. “Borrowed? They won’t notice that all of these are gone?”

“Well actually they aren’t gone. Technically, when they look at the bookshelves they will still see them, you know, it’s an illusion.”

“Ah okay....well that makes sense. So you have history, politics, religion, fiction, non-fiction....” Steve recites as he goes about the room looking at the different stacks. “Psychology, medical....you really have varied interests don’t you?”

The genie shrugs.

“....Marriage....divorce....?”

“Relationships or the lack thereof fascinate me....” The genie says.

“....The Joy of Sex?” Steve asks as he holds up the book.

The genie shrugs again. “You never know it might come in handy....whatever century I happen to be in I like to read the books from that time frame....” The genie gestures as he walks over to Steve and on the way he grabs a book. “....And it helps me to understand you better....like this book....” The genie holds it up then he opens it and thumbs through a few pages until he finds what he is looking for. “It says right here....if a man your age...” He points to Steve. “....isn’t married with children or isn’t in some sort of a long-term established relationship then he may have commitment issues.....”

Before he can finish Steve grabs the book out of his hand and he slams it shut and he tosses it onto a stack. “Okay....enough of that.” Steve turns and he makes his way into the kitchen. “So what is for dinner?” Steve asks as he tries to open the oven door but the genie jumps in front of it.

"It's not done yet. How come you weren't mentioned in the history books?" The genie asks seriously.

Steve laughs. "Because I am not historical or dead and there is one more thing that I am not...." Steve replies as he gets a bottle of water out of the fridge.

"What is that?" The genie asks.

"...Important enough."

"Oh no how can you say that Master, I mean you are important...you....you came from a family of Portuguese immigrants and now you are living the America dream! Look at you! You have done things that others have only dreamed of....!"

"Do you always do this much research on the people that you grant wishes to....?" Steve asks.

The genie thinks about it then he says. "Oh no Master....I want to be like you...I mean after I become human...."

Steve almost chokes on his water. "...You....can't be like me!" Steve coughs.

"Why?" The genie asks innocently.

"Why? Because every person is different...." Steve says.

"Oh I see so I can't have the same morals and values as you....?"

"...Well..." Steve replies.

"...Or believe in the same things as you do....?"

"...Well...." Steve replies.

"...Or even like or hate the same things as you....?"

"...I didn't say that...." Steve replies.

"Then what is the problem then? I can't think of anybody else I would like to be like....than you." The genie says.

Steve paces around the kitchen. "You don't want to be like me because I have....phobias....hang-ups... ah....commitment issues...." Steve says as he snaps his fingers. ".....doubts! I have doubts....some days I wake up and I don't want to be....me!"

The genie leans against back against the kitchen counter his arms crossed over his chest his feet crossed at the ankles as he watched Steve pace back and forth.

“....Some days it really sucks to be me! I am stubborn....set in my ways....moody! I can be really moody! Why don’t you pick somebody else to be like....like the President?”

“....Because I want to be a singer” The genie says.

“....A singer?” Steve asks.

“Yeah....after I become human I will need a profession....so I picked singing!”

Steve can’t help himself and try as hard as he might he starts to laugh.

“What is so funny?” The genie asks.

“Oh....I am sorry but....it isn’t that easy to be a singer. I mean....it takes years of hard work and sacrifice.....” Steve explains.

“I know that! I have done research remember!”

The buzzer goes off signaling that dinner is ready. The genie grabs his oven mitts and he opens the oven and he takes out the casserole and he sets it on top of the stove.

“Hey that smells like....” Steve says.

“That is your mother’s tuna casserole. I found the recipes. Your mother is an extraordinary woman.”

Steve looks sad. “Yes she was but she is....”

The genie holds up one finger. “No she is. People never really die....” The genie carries the casserole into the dining room and he sets it on the table and Steve follows.

“Is that something that you got out of one of your books?” Steve asks as he sits down.

“No....” The genie says as he spoons the casserole onto Steve’s plate. “I have seen her and spoke to her....you didn’t think that you were the only one in your family to have a wish....now did you? Enjoy your dinner Master I have more reading to do.”

The genie pats him on the shoulder as Steve looks up at him then as he starts to walk away Steve opens his mouth to reply, ask a question, say something intelligent to that remark but he thinks better of it so instead he grabs a roll, his fork and he eats his dinner.

At eleven that night Steve was in his bathroom brushing his teeth getting ready for bed and after he had rinsed he grab the towel from the bar and he looked up into the mirror to see the genie standing behind him.

“Oh shit! Do you always have to do that?” Steve says to his reflection in the mirror.

“Do what?” The genie asks.

“...You know...sneak up on people? Sneak up on me! Don’t you knock? What if I had been....?” Steve pulls his robe closer around his neck.

“...Naked?” The genie says as he crosses his arms over his chest.

“Could you knock next time, please?” Steve says to the reflection in the mirror.

“Yes Master your wish is my command....” The genie says as he bows and then he disappears and a split second later Steve hears a knock on the bathroom door.

“Are you decent Master?” The genie asks.

Steve can’t help but smile. “Yes. Come in.”

The door opens and the genie comes back into the bathroom then he takes the towel from the basin and he hangs it back up on the rod.

“You know Master you really need slippers....” The genie points to Steve’s feet and Steve looks down and in the next instance Steve is wearing a pair of comfy warm slippers. Steve wiggles his feet.

“You don’t have to....” Steve says then the genie hands him a cup of hot tea. “What is this?”

“It’s called Nighty-Nighty Tea it is to help you sleep.”

Steve takes a sip. “You know you don’t have to wait on me hand and foot I can do....”

“I turned down your bed for you....” The genie says.

Steve looks at him over the rim of the cup. “You didn’t have to....”

“I sense you have a question for me Master?” The genie says as he rocks back and forth on his heels his hands in his pockets.

Then Steve notices something. “Hey are those my pants and my t-shirt?” Steve moves closer to him. “Those are my pants and my Hawaii t-shirt!”

The genie looks down. "Yes they are yours. I found them in the dryer. You should really put your clothes away after they get dried....oh yeah I did that....I folded your laundry and put them away."

"I suppose your wearing my underwear too?" Steve says.

"Underwear, what's that?" The genie asks.

"....Never mind...." Steve replies.

The genie unbuttons the pants then he begins to unzip them. "Do you wish me to take them off Master?"

Steve raises his hand to stop him. "No! No! That is okay! You can wear them."

The genie zips them back up then he buttons them and he stands there with his hands on his hips. "Well....?" The genie asks.

"Well what?" Steve asks.

"The question, I sense you have a question."

Steve brushes pass him. "That was the question." Steve says as he goes into his bedroom and he sits the empty tea cup on the dresser and the genie immediately picks it up and it disappears as Steve looks at his bed.

"You changed the sheets too....?" Steve asks.

"Of course....and that wasn't the question. I mean about the clothes....you have a question....lingering in the back of your mind."

"I thought I told you to turn that feature off." Steve says. "Reading my mind and all."

"I did and I didn't read your mind at all. I can still sense things and I sense that you have a question. So why don't you just ask it and get it...."

"....Do you....I mean....does she like movies?" Steve asks over his shoulder.

"She can like whatever you wish....movies, food, music; she will even know your favorite positions...." The genie says.

Steve turns around. "....I'm not really concerned with that...."

"....Liar." The genie says.

They look at one another as Steve fidgets with the belt on his robe. "Is there some way, you know, to make it so I don't know that it is....?"

"....Like I said I can fix anything....it will be like I was never here....all you will see is her....I am very good at what I do...." The genie says.

"What about when it's over and you get what you want....and you....I mean she disappears....what about me?"

"You....won't remember any of it." The genie tilts his head. "....Only if you wish to....I can fix that too." The genie senses Steve's nervousness as he moves closer to him with his hands behind his back and he whispers in his ear. "Tell you what....only for you and for a limited time only I am offering a free trial period....if you don't like it I will sense it and things will be back to....normal."

"What will she be like I mean...." Steve asks suspiciously.

"She will be like any other woman....similar....but also different." The genie says.

"What do you mean by.....different?" Steve asks.

"She won't nag you....she won't be angry if you are late for dinner....she will respect your space....however you wish her to be she will be....it is a win-win situation. So....what do you say? Blonde.....redhead or the....?"

"....Free-trial basis?" Steve asks.

"Absolutely...." The genie replies.

"....No strings attached?" Steve asks.

"Cross my heart...." The genie replies.

"....Brunette...." Steve says.

"Your wish is my command Master."

The genie takes a few steps back, he smiles, and then he snaps his fingers three times and after the flash clears standing there is the brunette looking freshly scrubbed and ready for bed smiling wearing the top to his pajamas bottoms. Steve is stunned, shocked and he knows that his chin must be to the floor.

"Anything wrong honey?" She asks.

"What? Oh no nothing is wrong but aren't you cold....?" Steve asks as he looks at her bare feet and legs and at pajamas top that looks so much better on her.

Then as she smiles she comes closer to him. “Oh maybe just a little but you can warm me up right?” She winks at him as she unties the belt on his bathrobe and Steve watches her somewhat nervous and afraid to touch her. After she unties it she reaches up and she pushes it off of his shoulders and it hits the floor in a heap behind Steve then she puts her arms around him but he still doesn’t touch her. “Don’t be nervous Steve. Go ahead and touch me I’m real.”

Steve looks in her eyes then he puts his arms around her and he feels her warmth and he can smell the scent of her hair.

She smiles. “See I told you. Still need more convincing?”

“Well I....”

Steve starts to say but he doesn’t finish because she kisses him and her kiss fills him with something that he hasn’t felt in a while. Maybe he was lonely and he was denying it and until now he didn’t realize how much he craved companionship and until she kissed him he didn’t realized what he had been missing....he feels his nervousness leave him like the chill on a winter day when the sun comes up and he pulls her tighter to him. Steve moves his hands up and down her back as their kissing becomes more urgent and insistent and just when Steve thinks that he can’t take anymore she stops and she takes Steve by his hands and she pulls him toward the bed.

“Come on let’s go to bed.” She smiles at him.

“I thought you would never ask.” Steve replies as he lets himself be led.

5

Three strikes and you’re out and Neal has had three strikes and all three were bad. The prognosis from all three doctors was hip surgery and now the roles were reversed and Neal finds himself sitting where Steve had sat earlier and now all eyes were on him. Literally. They sat at the big, round huge conference table in the conference room, cups of imported coffee in front of them, four of them with their backs against the wall in the plush leather chairs while their manager Irving looked out at the window at the lush countryside tapping his finger against his chin.

“Neal this is bad news.” Ross says.

“No shit Sherlock how in the hell do you think I feel?” Neal says angrily.

“Why are we even discussing this?” Steve says as he looks at Neal.

“What in the fuck does that mean Perry?” Neal says.

“It means Neal....why are we discussing this?” Steve says as he stands up pushing the chair against the wall as he leans on the table in Neal’s direction.

“Steve is right....” Jon says.

“What?” Neal says.

“Neal options are all well and good if you had time but we don’t....” Jon says.

“Hey!” Neal grabs a hold of the table and he pulls himself in. “This is my life we are talking about here!”

“Wrong!” Steve says as he points at everybody at the table. “This is Journey’s life we are talking about here! The album is done! It is time to progress to the next level!”

Standing there looking at Steve and listening to him throwing his own words back at him Neal knows what comes next and once again Neal thinks that he is channeling Steve because he can’t stop himself from saying what he says next.....

“I beg you guys....” Neal closes his eyes and he can’t believe that he is humbling himself like this. Practically groveling in the dirt. Using the same words that Steve used that day. “....Let me try this. Please. I am still capable of doing what I need to do for this band. This doesn’t change anything. Come on guys....please?”

Steve is still bent over the table his hands leaning hard on the table as they look at one another. “Irving what do you think?” Steve says.

Irving turns away from the window and he walks over to Neal and of course Neal knows what he is going to say and as he speaks to him Neal’s gaze doesn’t leave Steve’s.

“We don’t want to lose you Neal so you do what you have to do but we have a schedule to keep. We’re shooting the video next week....” Irving says.

“I know and I will be there.” Neal says.

“Jesus Neal if there is anything I can do to help just ask.” Smitty says.

“Thanks Smitty.” Neal says.

“All right guys I know we have a lot to do. I for one have about a dozen phone calls to make and Neal, Jon and Steve don’t you guys have a radio interview across town?” Irving asks.

They nod their heads. "Then you three better get going. See you later." Irving says as he pats Neal on the back and he walks out of the room.

"See you guys later I have my own interview to do." Smitty says as he gets up and he too leaves.

"Later." Ross says as he leaves.

"Hey Jon can I ride with you Amy has my car." Neal says.

"Sorry Neal I have all the kid's stuff in the car there's no room you know."

Neal nods his head. "Come on Neal you can ride with me I don't bite. I'll drive around and pick you up at the back entrance."

"Yeah okay."

Steve leaves and Neal and Jon follow and once they reach the lobby they go one way and Neal goes the other. Neal didn't have to wait long, Steve drove up and he revved his engine and Neal got into his car and Neal barely had his door closed when Steve put the car in gear and he took off.

"Jeez Steve watch it!" Neal says.

"Oh Neal stop your bitching." Steve says as he roars out of the parking lot. "You know it's not often that I get the chance to drive a fancy car like this so when I do I like to open her up a little....Steve has some cool toys doesn't he Neal?" Steve turns his head to look at him and then in a blink of an eye he changes back into the young Steve that Neal had the great misfortune to meet at Steve's house.

Neal puts his hand on the door handle of the car.

"Oh Neal if you open that car door you will have a greater problem than your hip buddy boy. Just relax." The genie says.

"Then let me out." Neal says.

"Now Neal you know I can't do that we have an interview to go to." The genie says as he shifts gears. "So Neal tell me how does it feel to be in Steve's shoes huh?"

"I don't like it so why don't you take me to wherever Steve is and I will tell him that I am sorry, okay. I'll apologize and then you can reverse this wish, cancel it, or do whatever you have to do."

The genie laughs. "Oh Neal I can't do that, you see, it is a case of just a little too late and besides Steve is busy with his girlfriend and I would hate to...."

“Steve has a girlfriend?” Neal asks.

The genie nods his head. “And how is Amy these days Neal?”

“That is none of your business.” Neal says.

The genie changes gears again and he passes cars left and right and Neal braces himself against the dash of the car.

“Slow down okay. You’re going too fast!”

“Oh Neal what are you worried about I have it under control...” The genie says as he shifts gears again and he weaves in and out of cars.

“I don’t want to die okay!” Neal yells.

“You know that is really funny that you say that because I think Steve told you the exact same thing didn’t he?” The genie shifts gears again.

“What....what do you want me to do? Just tell me and I’ll do it okay! Just make it stop okay! What do you want me to do?” Neal yells as the car goes faster and faster. “Just tell me!”

“I want you to drive Neal!” The genie says as he smiles and he hands Neal the steering wheel and Neal screams.....

Amy was in the kitchenette making coffee when she heard Neal scream from the bedroom, actually it was a huge room that had a curtain that served as a divider and it gave some privacy and they placed a cot there for Neal so he could rest between takes. Neal’s high pierced scream startled her so much that she dropped the coffee pot and it shattered when it hit the floor and she had to jump over to avoid it as she ran to the other side of the room and she slid the curtain back to find Neal sitting up on the cot, the blanket tangled, his face flushed and sweaty.

“Neal! Oh my god Neal! What happened....?” Amy says as she sits beside him on the cot holding his face in her hands. “Neal sweetheart....”

“Amy....?” Neal says as he looks at her.

Just then they hear the door to the dressing room open and Jon is pulling back the curtain the rest of the way and with him is Smitty and Ross.

“What in the hell was that?” Jon asks.

“Yeah Amy what’s going on?” Smitty asks.

“Neal, man are you okay?” Ross asks.

“Neal honey are you all right? You were screaming....” Amy says.

Neal swings his legs over the side of the cot and he looks at the guys standing there. “I was....?”

“Yeah Neal you sounded like a frigging banshee.” Jon says.

“I....guess....I was having a bad dream. Honey I think it’s time for another pill okay?” Neal says as he rubs his eyes.

Amy puts her hand on his back. “Neal you just had one a little while....”

“Amy....it’s time for another pill....okay!” Neal says through clenched teeth.

Jon, Ross and Smitty look on as Amy stands up and she doesn’t bother to hide her anger. “If you want another pill you can get it yourself! I’m going home!” The guys make a way for her so she can pass and they watch as she grabs her purse out of the chair and her coat off of the hook.

Neal grabs his cane and he uneasily gets to his feet. “Amy! Don’t go!”

Amy puts on her coat and she pulls her hair out from under it then she slings her purse over her shoulder.

“Amy!” Neal yells.

Amy ignores him, she brushes the tears from her eyes as she makes her way to the door and just before she can step over the threshold Steve is suddenly there and they run into each other and Steve out of impulse puts his arms around her.

“Amy? What in the hell....?” Steve asks as he looks at her.

“Don’t touch her!” Neal says angrily.

Steve looks at Neal his forehead furrowed. “What in the hell are you talking about? She ran into me!”

Amy looks at Steve. "Steve don't...."

"Oh you two look so cozy! I said don't touch her!" Neal yells.

Steve puts his arms down and Amy steps back. "I heard a scream. Jon, somebody please tell me what is going on."

Jon looks at Neal. "Neal had a nightmare or something...."

"It's his fault!" Neal points at Steve and Steve opens his mouth to protest but Neal stops him.

"You heard me! It's your fault!" Neal hobbles closer to Amy and he takes her by her hand.

"Let me go!" Amy says.

"Get away from him and call security! That isn't Steve!" Neal says.

Jon, Ross and Smitty are all shocked. They shake their heads and Steve's mouth drops opens and he pats himself on the chest. "Okay Neal I'll bite! If I'm not Steve who in the hell am I?"

Neal points his cane at him. "I...I don't know exactly! But I know you aren't Steve! You're some sort of....genie!"

Steve laughs. "A genie?" Then Steve stops laughing. "You better lay off those pain pills Neal....their messing with your frigging head and not to mention the fact you're becoming addicted....!"

Neal makes a move towards Steve and he raises his cane but Jon steps in front of him and he takes it away from him. "Neal!"

Neal being the shorter of the two has to look up at him. "So you're on his side too!"

Jon takes a deep breath. "I am not on anybody's side Neal. Ross go and tell the director that we are finished for the day." Jon says to Ross and Ross nods his head and he leaves.

"So who died and made you fucking boss?" Neal says as he pokes Jon in the chest then Amy is there and she distracts him by taking his hand.

"Neal honey let's go home and tomorrow you can go back to the doctor...."

"Don't patronize me! You don't understand what is going on here! He...." Neal points to Steve. "....is doing it! I know he looks like Steve but he isn't! He wants me to feel

*what it is like to have his bad hip! Well now I do and I want it to stop! I'm sorry!
SORRY! SORRY!"*

"Neal! Neal! Wake up man I can hear you all the way out in the hall!"

"What?" Neal opens his eyes to see Steve standing there.

"I said I can hear you all the way out in the hall. That must have been some dream. They want us on the set in twenty minutes."

Neal rubs his eyes as he slowly sits up. "Twenty minutes? Man you could have let me sleep longer."

"Neal it is going to take you that long to pull your shit together. Come on give me that ice pack...." Steve says as he holds his hand out and Neal looking up at him has that weird feeling of deja-vu. "Come on."

Neal looks down at the ice pack then he slowly picks it up and he hands it to Steve and Neal knows that Steve is now going to put it back in the ice chest for later and like clock-work Steve does this. Neal swings his legs slowly over the side of the cot.

"Here's your cane and your clothes are hanging on the back of the door." Neal takes the cane from him and using it he slowly gets to his feet without any help from Steve. "Buck up Neal we have a lot of work to do today!" Steve says as he pats him on the arm and Neal watches him leave the dressing room.

6

It was a strange turn of events to be sure but Steve wasn't complaining. One day she wasn't there and the next she was. Julie was a gem to be sure. She was almost too good to be true and maybe that was the problem. Julie was calm and she went with the flow. Even the sexual aspect of their relationship seem to be in sync and in Steve's experience that was weird but not unheard of. In his past relationships Steve was in the mood but she wasn't, or she was in the mood and Steve wasn't it was either one or the other but with Julie if all Steve wanted to do was cuddle that was fine with her or vice-versa and if she wanted to make love well he wanted to also....okay so maybe that was unheard of. So Steve wasn't complaining. She was his constant companion. They went everywhere together but then again that was also....weird. If Steve had business to take care of and she couldn't go she didn't protest she seem to understand. On this day they were going to the movies and at this time of day there was no curbside

parking, all the meters were full so Steve had to park in the parking garage and that is when they ran into each other.

Steve and Julie were walking out of the parking garage and Neal was walking in and he and Steve collide.

“Neal?” Steve said.

“Steve?” Neal said.

And that is when Neal saw Julie and Neal knew that she wasn't what she seem. Julie looked at him and there was a smirk on her face, something akin to satisfaction because Neal was limping. He had just come from therapy another option that Neal was trying and call it vanity, or call it trying to keep some of his personal life to himself but he didn't use his cane, he had left it in the car so after therapy he tried to get there as fast as he could and then drive as fast and as far as he could get out of the city to some remote place and there in the privacy of his car....he would scream. And the way things stood Neal now knows that Steve had done that himself.

“Steve, honey aren't you going to introduce us?” Julie asked Steve as she gave Neal another smirk.

“Oh yeah I'm sorry.” Steve laughs. “Julie this is Neal and Neal this is Julie.”

“Nice to meet you Neal.” Julie says.

“Likewise.”

Neal looks at 'Julie' and Neal wants to laugh. He was impressed. This Wish Granter or whatever the hell 'he' was or 'it' was Neal had to admit that it was good and 'it' or 'he' whatever the case was certainly enjoying this moment and Neal couldn't stop looking at her.

“Steve can we talk?” Neal says to Steve but his gaze drifts over to Julie who raises an eyebrow.

And Steve notices this silent exchange. “Sure. We have time before the movie.” Steve takes out his wallet and he gives Julie some money. “Julie would you go and buy the tickets please.”

Julie takes the money and without saying a word she turns and walks off.

“New girlfriend?” Neal asks and Steve doesn't answer. “You look good.”

“....And you look like shit. What have you been doing?” Steve says.

Neal moves closer to Steve and he says. "I think you know what I have been doing."

"I..." Steve says.

"When is it going to be enough Steve? How far is it going to go?" Neal asks.

"That is up to you." Steve says.

"I'm sorry." Neal says.

Steve shakes his head. "It's too late."

Neal moves closer to Steve. "I know about the 'thing' that is passing itself off as your girlfriend...."

"I hope that I'm not interrupting anything." They hear Julie say and they both jump startled.

"No of course not." Steve smiles at Julie as he takes her by the hand.

"Right Neal?"

Neal looks at Julie. "Yeah right."

"Good, you know how I hate to miss the previews. Let's go." Julie begins to pull Steve by his hand and Neal watches them go. Steve first looks back over his shoulder then Julie looks back over hers with that same smug expression and when they go into the theater Neal limps to his car and he gets in it and he drives off looking for that perfect remote location. After all it would have been what Steve would have done....way back when.

7

"So....I sensed that something was bothering you Master. You were not happy with....Julie?" The genie asks as he crosses his arms over his chest.

Steve scratches his head and he takes a deep breath. "Let me run this up the flag pole and see if you salute it...."

"Ewww good one Master!" The genie says.

"Thank you. Have you ever seen the movie The Stepford Wives?" Steve says as he raises his eyebrows at him.

The genie thinks a moment then he snaps his fingers his eyes widen. "Gotcha, she is too...."

"Perfect." They both say at the same time.

"You know, sometimes, conflict can be a good thing and sometimes you just want to fight so you can make up." Steve says.

"Really? How does that work? Oh....may I take notes Master?" The genie whips out a huge notepad.

"Sure....let me see...." Steve tells him about the concept of "Fighting to Make-Up or How Make-Up Sex is The Best"

"Wow....Master this is most fascinating!" The genie says.

"Oh yeah....it is all right up here...." Steve taps himself on the head. "....In the Perry book of knowledge...."

"You see Master that is why I want to be like you....after I grow up!" The genie laughs.

Steve rubs his forehead. "I thought we discussed that I don't want you...hey! You're wearing my shoes!" Steve says as he points.

"Yes Master to get to know someone better you have to walk in their shoes...don't you?"

8

It had been horrible. The making of the video was the most horrible experience in Neal's musical career. It wasn't so much the pain, that was horrible in itself but it was the fact that everybody....knew or at least Neal thought that everybody knew and it was the way they looked at him. Like he was an invalid, sick, crippled, like he had a bad....hip. It was like how Neal had looked at Steve back when his hip was....Neal wondered vaguely how it came across on video or if it did. The only way Neal was able to get through was with ice packs and pain medicine, very strong pain medicine. The guys had their own private showing of the video and Steve's idea was a great one, it was a beautiful video, exactly what they wanted and Neal looked good. You couldn't tell that anything was amiss but that didn't stop Steve from looking at him. After it was over there were high fives all around, it was great, beautiful, and wonderful and Steve kept looking at Neal. Neal wanted to slip out of the room but with his cane he couldn't and even before Neal could hobble a few steps Steve was there and instead of opening the door for him Steve stood in front of it.

“Steve....”

“Neal we have to talk.” Steve says.

“About....?” Neal looks at him as he leans on his cane and Neal watches as Steve’s eyes drift down to the cane then Neal stands up straighter. “Could you move I’ve have appointments....”

“It’s not working Neal....”

“It would if you would just stop....” Neal says.

“I can’t....we can’t....” Steve says.

“....So they appointed you the spokesman....the fucking lead singer is now the spokesman for the band....” Neal says with just a touch of anger.

Steve looks at the floor his arms crossed over his chest. “Don’t make this harder....”

Neal laughs. “Oh that is rich! Just fucking say it Steve and get it....”

Steve raises his head and he looks at him. “Alright, you want to hear it? Hurt....on your own time and not on Journey’s....”

“....Get out of my way.” Neal says.

“There is still time but Neal the clock is ticking! Your options....” Steve gestures. “....aren’t working!”

Neal pushes passed him with his free arm but Steve grabs it. “Neal....I’m just trying to give you a heads up here....go and do the surgery....”

“....And....” Neal says.

“....Nobody is above being replaced. Not even you.” Steve simply says.

“....Journey is my fucking band, Gregg and I....” Neal says.

“....The rules apply to everybody....” Steve says.

Neal then wrenches his arm out of Steve’s grasp and without answering Neal continues on his way passed him.

“Don’t be a fool!”

Neal continues to be silent as he pushes open the door and he leaves and the funny thing is as he was leaving Neal didn't remember ever having this conversation with Steve before, there was no feeling of déjà vu there was just a feeling of confusion and fear.

9

Steve for the most part was on his own side trip through the land of confusion and when he was this confused it usually had something to do with the opposite sex and in this case there was no exception. For awhile things were on an even keel with Julie but today it was like somebody had thrown a huge monkey wrench into the engine and it had come to a screeching halt, Julie had burned dinner. To Steve that was no big deal, hell, he had burned countless dinners but he didn't think that it was a reason to cry and Lord cried she did. She tossed the dinner into the sink and she cried like a baby and of course Steve being who he was came up behind her and he put his arms around her....tears....Steve couldn't stand tears.

"Hey honey its okay; it's no big deal. We're just go out to dinner."

Julie turns around and by the look on her face Steve knows that he made a major mistake.

"No big deal? No big deal! I just spent all day in the kitchen slaving over a hot stove to make you a special dinner! You've forgotten what day it is haven't you?" She stands there her arms crossed over her chest and her foot tapping.

And Steve is shocked so shocked that he opens his mouth but nothing comes out.

"Oh! You have forgotten! It is our anniversary!" Julie says.

"Anni....anniversary?"

"Yes Steve our anniversary! It has been one month to the day!"

"A month! Has it been a month already? Time flies...." Steve says.

"....Stephen Ray Perry!" She says loudly then she stomps her foot and she almost knocks Steve off his feet as she runs out of the room.

"What? What did I say?" He asks as he follows after her.

"It wasn't what you said it was how you said it!" Julie says as she makes for the bedroom.

"....How....how did I say it?" Steve says.

When Julie gets to the door of the bedroom she turns and Steve is right behind her and they collide.

“....You said it like....like it had been a really....really long month!” Julie says.

“No, I didn’t say it that way.” Steve counters.

“Yes you did!”

Steve rubs his forehead and he takes a deep breath. “Okay I am sorry for saying it that way, I didn’t mean it that way, I meant I can’t believe that it has been a month already because I have been so....happy. That is what I meant.”

Steve stands there looking at her with his hands on his hips and he thinks that she is going to cry again and he is right. Her eyes start to tear up and her bottom lip quivers and he wonders what he said this time. Then she stands on her tip toes and she throws her arms around him.

“Oh Steve! I am so glad that you’re happy because I am happy too and the answer is....yes!”

Steve wasn’t sure that he heard right. “Yes...?”

“Yes! The answer is yes I would love to get married!”

Steve suddenly felt lightheaded and he thought that he was going to faint right there in the hallway and if it wasn’t for the wall and Julie holding him up he would have.

“WHAT?! Wait! Who.....who....who....said anything about getting married?” Steve finally manages to say.

“I mean it has been a month and I think we should at least talk about it, don’t you?” Julie says.

Now Steve knows that he has heard all this before from another woman so many years ago and back then just as now he was dumbfounded.

“Steve....? We can talk about it right?”

Julie looks at him and he looks at her. “Well....I....”

“Oh I see, why buy the cow when you can get the milk for free. Is that it?” Julie asks.

“No that isn’t it....I mean all of this is so sudden...I just think we shouldn’t move so fast....” Steve takes her by the hands. “.....Julie we aren’t ready to get married but I

can always keep an open mind.” Steve smiles at her. “Now....why don’t you get all dressed up in your prettiest outfit and we can go out and celebrate our anniversary, okay?”

Julie smiles at him then she hugs him. “Okay but you promise to keep an open mind?”

“Yes I promise.” Steve raises his right hand and for Julie that must have been good enough because she gives him a kiss then she turns and goes into the bedroom and Steve felt like that he had just dodged a bullet.

10

By this stage of this farce, this craziness, this half-witted attempt at what-ever-you-want-to-call-it Neal couldn’t dodge a slow moving cockroach; turtles were moving faster than him. He can’t believe that Amy has stuck around but even that was on a thin tether these days, soon, Neal reasoned she will get tired of having to deal with a gimp who couldn’t keep up with everybody else so that is when he decided. He decided to really dope himself up so that he could sleep, kill all traces of pain, and make himself be almost practically comatose because tomorrow he was going to find that genie and he would tell him that he would do anything to make this go away, makes things go back to normal, if there was such a thing to begin with. So Neal took his pain pills and a really strong sleeping pill and he closed his eyes and he drifted off to sleep.

11

To be sure it was a strange state of affairs and Steve wasn’t above doing his own research so he spent a whole day at the library reading about Genie’s. Of course he got strange looks when he asked the librarian where he could find books about Genie’s and there wasn’t that many to begin with so he took the ones that they had and he read up on them. After being there awhile he picked out one of the better ones, he checked it out then he headed towards home and coming home these days he didn’t know exactly what or who he would find. And today....well he should have stayed at the library. When he pulled into the garage is when he heard it, coming from the house and it was loud. Music, somebody singing, Steve went through the kitchen as always and when he rounded the corner into the living room that is when he saw it....

Steve crosses his arms over his chest one hand holding the book that he got from the library.

“While the master is away the genie will play, is that it?”

The genie had his back to Steve and when he heard his voice he turned. The genie was wearing Steve's black tux tail coat and the yellow shirt and jeans and of course Nike's, the genie was singing along to a Karaoke machine which he reached over and he turned off.

"Master, you're home!"

".....Where did you get that outfit?" Steve asks as he waves the book at him.

The genie holds the lapels of the tux coat. "Oh this....well this was in the attic...."

"No it wasn't, that tux coat was but that shirt hadn't been seen in years and the same goes for the shoes....where did you get it?" Steve asks angrily.

The genie comes closer. "Master I detect some anger. Why are you angry?"

"Why...? I am angry because I come home to find you wearing my clothes and singing to my songs on a Karaoke machine. Practicing to be me?"

"Well yes....I told you that I wanted to be like you...."

Steve comes closer. "....Be like me or become me? There is a difference you know...."

The genie has that look about him and Steve knew that he was right but instead of answering the genie changed the subject. "What....what is that book you have there?"

Steve holds the book up. "This? Oh nothing I was just doing some research of my own...."

"Research master?"

"Yes research on you." Steve points at him.

"Me?" The genie asks.

"According to this book...." Steve opens the book to the marked page and as he reads it he moves forward causing the genie to back up. "....genies are liars..."

"No! That isn't true....!"

".....Genies can be dangerous and they like to change the wordings of wishes to suit their own purposes....and no wish IS FREE!"

"....I already told you that!" The genie points his finger at Steve. "I told you....!"

Again Steve reads from the book. "They sometimes require high payments....such as first born children....."

"....Only in extreme circumstances...." The genie says.

"....and the life and persona of the one making the wish....also known as their....soul!"

"Give me that book!" The genie snatches the book out of Steve's hands then he tosses it into the air and it disappears with a flash and the genie rubs his hands together.

"You can't believe everything you read!"

"You really don't think that you can get away with it do you? Pretending to be me?" Steve points at himself.

"Oh I don't know I have been doing a pretty good job of lately." The genie says smugly as he looks at his nails. "The neighbors....your so-called band mates....and.....Sherrie." The genie looks at him.

"Sherrie?" Steve says shocked.

"Yeah Sherrie! You know from "Oh, Sherrie" fame your old girlfriend!"

"What does she have to do with this? I haven't seen her in years."

The genie laughs. "Oh sure you have, last week as a matter-of-fact, you just happened to run into her in Bakersfield and she is...."

Right then and there Steve reaches out and he grabs him by the lapels and he pulls him to him.

"You....little freak....leave her alone!" Steve says through clenched teeth.

And the genie raises one finger. "....See....you are still carrying that torch! Isn't your arm tired by now?"

Steve ignores that remark and he says. "I have a surprise for you."

"A surprise for me Master?" The genie asks.

"Yes....I have another wish." Steve says.

"You do?" The genie asks.

"Yeah....wanna hear it?" Steve asks as he moves his face closer to the genies.

“No not especially....” The genie says.

“Well too bad....I wish....!”

12

Neal felt himself moving but it wasn't under his own power. He was moving down a hall and then into another room and from there from one table to another. He saw a few people and they were all wearing gowns and face masks, the room was chilly, and it smelled sterile and antiseptic and he couldn't speak because there was an oxygen mask placed over his nose and mouth and he felt things being hooked up to him and he felt his eyes getting heavy.

“Alright Neal just relax and count back from 10.” Neal heard the voice say.

“Ten...” Neal didn't want to but he felt himself becoming sleepy.

“Nine....” No! He didn't want this to happen! He was screaming on the inside! He wanted it to stop.

“Eight....” His eyes by now are almost closed his speech is slurred.

“Six...”

Then just before his eyes closed and he stops speaking all together he sees a pair of eyes come into view and then a gloved hand reaches up and it pulls down the mask on its face and Neal's eyes widen as he sees that it is the genie.

“Hi there buddy how's it going?” The genie asks as he looks around. “Not too good by the looks of it huh?”

Neal tries to say something but only his lips move but nothing comes out.

“Don't strain yourself there Neal old man I can read lips. You want this to stop? To go away....?” The genie asks.

Neal nods his head.

“Great! Tell you what I am going to do, just for you and for a limited time only I am going to make you a deal! Now I don't usually do this....what is that Neal?”

The genie watches as Neal moves his lips and the genie smiles. “Yes a deal! What is it you asked? It is very simple really....” The genie leans in closer. “You are going to love this Neal! My wish is to be the lead singer of Journey....! Isn’t that a kick in the head! All you have to do is shake on it and I can make all of this go away.....so what do you say Neal....wanna shake?”

Neal nods his head and he raises his hand to the genies and they shake....

Neal nods his head and he raises his hand to shake Steve Augeri’s hand.

“Welcome to Journey Steve let me introduce you to the guys....”

13

So what was it exactly that Steve wished for that night? Could it be that he wished for the same thing that anybody would wish for that was destined to be replaced? Did he wish for his replacement to do well? Did he wish for the band to carry on and be successful or did he wish for something entirely different? You decide.

And as for the Genie....

He should have been more careful what he wished for....