

# THE DETECTIVES OF THE 9<sup>TH</sup> PRECINCT

## MOONLIGHTING

### PART 2

#### TWO DAYS LATER AT STEVE'S APARTMENT:

*"Anybody home?" Neal asks as he walks around the corner of Steve's apartment building to find him cooking on a grill out on his patio. "There you are. I knocked but nobody answered. Steve are you cooking steak?"*

*"Yeah. Two of them actually." Steve replies as he turns them over. "One of these is yours if you want it."*

*"Steve I can't believe you bought steak. You've been suspended for a month without pay! You silly goofball! You should save your money. And not to mention the fact it's November."*

*"What does November have to do with anything? I wanted a steak and I can't grill in the apartment. Just so you know I had these already. Are you going to come in or are you going to stand out there all night?" Steve asks.*

*"I wasn't sure if you wanted to see me or not." Neal replies.*

*"Why wouldn't I want to see you?" Steve asks.*

*"It's my fault..."*

*Steve puts the steaks on a plate. "Do you want one or not?"*

*"Sure."*

*Steve reaches over and he opens the gate for him then Neal follows him into the apartment. "How did you know I was going to be here?" Neal asks as he hangs up his jacket then he helps Steve with setting the table.*

*"I called Ruby. Off the clock?" Steve asks as he looks back over his shoulder at him.*

*"Yeah."*

*"Do you want a beer?"*

*"Yeah. I could use a beer." Neal replies as he sits at the table.*

*Steve sets a bottle of beer and a glass down at Neal's plate then he puts a baked potato on the plate. Then he goes back into the kitchen and when he comes back he's carrying a bowl of salad and steak sauce which he sits on the table. Then he sits down at his place.*

### **AN HOUR AND HALF LATER:**

*"Here you go an ashtray." Steve replies as he hands it to Neal as he sits down next to him on the sofa.*

*"You're not going to make me go outside to smoke?" Neal replies.*

*Steve shrugs. "Na. Like you said it's November."*

*Neal lights up a cigarette. "What gives? First you give me a glass to drink my beer out of. A clean glass no less. You wouldn't let me help with the dishes and now you're letting me smoke inside your apartment?"*

*"I just thought you needed a break. You've been thru a lot here lately." Steve replies.*

*Neal laughs. "Are you crazy? You've been suspended for a month without pay and it was my fault! My stupidity almost got us fired! And you think I need a break?"*

*"First of all it wasn't your fault. We talked about it....together. We decided to go over there.... together. He deserved it. Everything he got he deserved it. I still think so. If I had the chance to do it all over again I would. As for being suspended, you have a lot more to lose than I do." Steve replies as he points at him. "I only have myself to worry about. You have Ruby and the baby, Joey, and not to mention a mortgage. If I have to I can start over. I've done it before." Steve puts his hand on Neal's shoulder. "The rent is paid for the month. So are the lights and gas. Other stuff I can push back. It's not a big deal."*

*"So the ends justifies the means?" Neal asks.*

*Steve shrugs. "Like I said if I had to I could start over. So yeah I think so."*

*Neal puts his cigarette out in the ashtray. "The Captain can barely look at me and I don't blame him. God." Neal leans back in the cushion of the sofa. "When he told us that he was disappointed in us I felt sick to my stomach."*

*"I know I did too. The look on his face." Steve replies.*

*"The Captain has been like a father to me and he treated me like a son. And I do this to him. I let him down."*

*"We...let him down. The question is how do we make things better? How do we change it?" Steve replies.*

*Neal shakes his head. "Oh I wish I knew. Ruby. She was really pissed at me. She yelled at me for a good two hours."*

*"Is your suitcase in the car?" Steve asks as he smiles at him.*

*"No. She wasn't that pissed." Neal looks over at Steve and Steve just shakes his head. "Okay I'm lying. She was that pissed."*

*"Uh huh."*

*"I can't blame her." Neal replies as he lights another cigarette and they sit there together as a few minutes of silence passes between them.*

*"The bullets from Roger's gun...they didn't match." Neal replies.*

*"Even if they had we couldn't have used it. Like the Captain said fruit from the poisonous tree."*

*"I was trying to keep myself busy so I went back thru Ivan's stuff again." Neal replies as he blows a smoke ring then he puts the cigarette out in the ashtray.*

*"What were you looking for?" Steve asks.*

*"Paycheck stubs. Anything that showed who he worked for."*

*"Anything?"*

*"Na but I did find something else. Something I don't understand." Neal replies as he gets up and goes over to his jacket and he takes an envelope out of it and he hands it to Steve.*

*"It's an envelope. An empty envelope." Steve replies as he turns it upside down. "You don't understand empty?" Steve asks him as he laughs.*

*"Bozo! I understand that! What I don't understand is why did he keep an empty envelope?" Neal replies as he gestures.*

*Steve turns the envelope over and he looks at it. "There's just half an address and Bakersfield?" Steve looks up at him. "I see your point. I wonder where the letter is that was in this envelope?"*

*Neal shrugs. "Threw it away. Misplaced it?"*

*Steve gets off of the sofa and he goes over to Neal. "Na I don't think so."*

*"What are you thinking?" Neal asks him.*

*"This might sound crazy but I think whatever was in this envelope was important to him." Steve replies.*

*"How do you know that?"*

*"Because see how the envelope was ripped open?" Steve replies as he shows it to him.*

*"Yeah so?"*

*"Can I show you an example?" Steve replies.*

*Neal shrugs. "Yeah sure I guess...hey where are you going?" Neal asks as Steve runs off into the bedroom.*

*Steve comes back a few minutes later carrying a shoebox. "Come on let's sit down."*

*Neal sits down next to Steve on the sofa and when Steve takes the lid off of the shoebox he hands it to Neal. Then he reaches in the box and takes out an envelope and Neal snatches it out of his hand.*

*"Hey! Steve! I can't believe you kept this all these years. The birthday card I sent you when you turned 15! You still have it!"*

*"Of course I still have it! I have every card and letter that you or my mom, or Ray, or Marv ever sent to me. And from a few other people too. Okay see how the envelope looks that you sent to me and the one that Ivan had."*

*"They look similar." Neal replies.*

*"They look similar because I couldn't wait to open this envelope that you sent to me and Ivan couldn't wait to open this one. He was expecting it. It was good news. He was in a hurry to open it. Neal how did you feel when you got those bills from the Hospital?"*

*"Oh man! I knew they would show up eventually but I wasn't prepared. I was scared. I didn't want to open them to see how much it was."*

*"And I bet you let them set for a few days, maybe even a week or two so you could get your courage up to open them. You might have even picked them up and looked at them but still you weren't ready. When you couldn't stand it any longer you finally open them...but you did it slowly. Trying to put off the inevitable for as long as you could. Am I right?"*

*"Yeah. Steve that's scary and they call me the brain."*

*Steve laughs. "Did that hospital bill envelope look like this one?" Steve asks as he holds up Ivan's envelope.*

*"No."*

*"Okay. Now think back to when you were in College. I know that was a long, long, long time ago for you!" Steve replies as he laughs.*

*"Watch it!"*

*"When you were in College your mother wrote you letters didn't she?" Steve asks.*

*"Oh yeah sure."*

*"And I bet you couldn't wait to open them could you?" Steve asks.*

*"Oh yeah sure she would send me money!" Neal replies.*

*Steve hits him on the arm. "Neal! That wasn't the only reason! She's your mother and you love her and you couldn't wait to hear from her. So I bet those envelopes looked like this one?" Steve replies as he holds the envelope up again. "The same thing with the letters Ivan's mother sent to him. He was happy to get them. He was expecting them so when he got them he ripped them open just like this one. Like I said whatever was in this envelope was important to him. He was waiting for it to come. If it was important to him them....it's important to us now. We need to find out what was in this envelope."*

*"So if it was that important to him he wouldn't just throw it away or misplace it?" Neal replies.*

*"Right. Ivan was very organized. All the letters from his family were still in their envelopes. All still intact. This one..." Steve replies as he holds it up. "Was just as important."*

*"And maybe it was just as important to someone else. Whatever was in this envelope could be part of the reason he was killed." Neal replies.*

*"Or it could be the whole reason." Steve replies. "Ivan wanted his family to come here for the same reasons our families came here Neal."*

*Neal rubs his forehead. "Freedom."*

*"Yeah. We have to show his family he didn't die in vain." Steve replies.*

*"I also went by and talk to Ava. She translated the letters for us and she also said that she would write a letter to his mother, telling her what had happened to Ivan." Neal replies.*

*"That is going to be a tough letter to write." Steve replies.*

*"It's going to be an even tougher letter to read. I better go." Neal replies as he hands Steve the lid to the shoebox. As they stand up Steve sits the box on the sofa.*

*"I'm going to give you some advice my mother gave to me." Steve replies as he puts his hand on Neal's shoulder. "Don't ever go to bed angry."*

*Neal smiles. "My mother told me the same thing. Thanks Steve. I'll call you tomorrow."*

*Steve helps him on with his jacket. "Goodnight Neal."*

*"Goodnight Steve."*

### **THREE DAYS LATER AT THE WOMEN'S COLLEGE OF OCEANVIEW:**

*Neal was looking for Steve. Again. For the past couple of days now Neal hadn't heard from him or seen him. He thought maybe he went to San Fran to see Nancy but he wasn't there. It wasn't really like Steve not to stay in touch with him. Unless. Unless Steve was doing something that he didn't want Neal to know about. Kinda like now. Neal didn't think Steve was doing anything...illegal. But was he doing something...crazy? Highly possible. When Steve had too much time on his hands he could get into anything. Kinda like now. Steve might relax for one day but after that Steve became antsy. Kinda like now.*

*It would only be reasonable to think that Steve was working a part time gig somewhere. But then again that begs the question...what kind of part time gig would it be.*

*Neal was asking himself that same question when he rolled up to the Women's College. Neal was working on a hunch. A gut feeling. He heard thru the grapevine that Steve could be found here. Doing what? Neal was about to find out. And he was hoping it was in a form of some janitorial work. But*

*looking at the name of this place, well, he had his doubts. He did notice that as he walked thru the parking lot it was full and that the lights were on in the Arts and Humanity Building.*

*“Excuse me?” Neal stops a young woman as she was going out to her car. “Is there something going on here? I mean a play or something? The parking lot is full.”*

*She smiles at him. “Try the Arts Department. They are holding a class. Nudes.” She replies pointing back over her shoulder.*

*Neal looks at the building. “Thanks.”*

*Neal goes in and he finds the Art Department’s class room but once getting there he can’t see in because of the frosted glass that surrounds the classroom. But he doesn’t have to wait long because the door to classroom is flung open, signaling the end of class, Neal has to jump out of the way of the swinging door. Not to mention all the women that are leaving. When the exodus slows down Neal peeks around the corner and he smiles as he creeps into the room.*

*“Hey sailor come here often?” Neal replies as he sneaks up behind Steve.*

*Steve jumps a good foot as he lets out a cry of surprise clutching the neck of the bathrobe closer around him.*

*Neal looks at the floor, his arms crossed over his chest, smiling as Steve slowly turns around then he slaps Neal on the arm.*

*“You big, blue meanie! I told you about sneaking up on people!! What if I had passed out from fright?!”*

*“Oh then I am sure one of these women would have volunteered to save you.” Neal replies as he smiles.*

*“How did you find me?” Steve asks.*

*“You’re kidding right? What is that?” Neal asks as he points to the pocket of the robe.*

*“What?” Steve asks.*

*“This?” Neal asks as he reaches out and takes it out of the pocket as Steve tries to stop him.*

*“Give that back!!” Steve replies.*

*Neal laughs as he holds it up. “What is this?”*

*Steve snatches it back from him. “If you must know it’s a fig leaf.”*

*Neal laughs harder. “A...a fig leaf?! Steve! What were you doing?”*

*“Oh alright anyway! This is my part time job!” Steve replies.*

*“Steve.” Neal and Steve turn to see a young woman approaching them and she too is wearing a robe. Carrying an apple with a rubber snake draped around her neck she hands Steve a piece of paper.*

*“Call me.” She replies as he walks off smiling.*

*"You're going to make me guess, aren't you?" Neal replies.*

*"Oh sure why in the hell not?" Steve replies.*

*"Adam and Eve?" Neal replies as he covers his mouth.*

*"Something like that. Yes." Steve replies as Neal watches another young woman approach them and she hands Steve another slip of paper.*

*"My name is Mitzy. Call me."*

*Neal looks around. "It's a variable smorgasbord."*

*Again another woman approaches them but this time she hands Steve an envelope. "Here you go Steve two hundred dollars."*

*"Thank you Ms..."*

*"Two hundred dollars?" Neal exclaims loudly. "Wow maybe I should..."*

*"What's your name?" She asks Neal as she looks him up and down.*

*"Me?" Neal asks as he points to himself. "Ah...."*

*"It's Neal." Steve replies.*

*"Oh yeah! It is! My name is Neal!"*

*"Neal. How do feel about Gladiators?"*

#### **TWENTY MINUTES LATER AT NEAL'S CAR:**

*"Adam and Eve?" Neal asks.*

*"It's an easy two hundred dollars." Steve replies as he shrugs. "They hire people as models. They are budding art students. They sketch the human form. Last night it was the male human form. Tonight it was the female and male human form. All for the sake of art they say. Besides you should have seen the jobs I turned down. I do have some dignity you know."*

*"Uh huh. So last night what were you...." Neal asks.*

*"I was holding a bowl of fruit." Steve replies.*

*"Small bowl was it?" Neal asks as he laughs.*

*"Ha. Ha. Wiseacre. Hey you know you could do this too! All you got to do is stand there and look manly. You fit the gladiator costume."*

*"It's a helmet and a sword!" Neal replies.*

*"So! Just stand there with the sword in front of you." Steve replies as he demonstrates.*

*"That sword ain't that wide Steve!" Neal looks around. "I didn't see your car how did you get here?"*

*"I took the bus." Steve replies.*

*"The bus?"*

*"Yes the bus. You know a big long tube with windows and four tires? A bus! You told me to save my money! Gas is 45 cents a gallon Neal!" Steve replies. "So what did you want anyway?"*

*"That's a fine how do you do I must say! I was worried about you! I haven't heard from you in days and when I come to look for you I find you naked and being leered at by a bunch of women! I see now I've wasted a good panic for nothing."*

*Steve holds up one finger. "All for the sake of art and two hundred dollars!"*

*"I may have found us a part time job." Neal replies.*

*"A job? What is it?" Steve asks.*

*"Can you drive a truck?" Neal asks.*

*"How big of a truck?"*

*"A box truck?" Neal asks hopefully.*

*"Sure. How hard can it be?"*

#### **THE NEXT DAY SOMEWHERE IN OCEANVIEW:**

*"Steve! What are you doing? They can't gear for a reason!" Neal yells as the truck Steve is trying to drive comes to squelchy bouncy halt. The truck rocking back and forth.*

*"So! So I missed it! It has more!" Steve replies.*

*"I thought you said that you could drive a box truck?!"*

*"No Neal you said, that I said that!" Steve points out. "Where did you learn to drive a truck anyway?"*

*"Yesterday when I asked you, you said sure! College. A part time job."*

*Steve takes a deep breath of exasperation "Yes I said sure but you missed the part after that where I said, how hard can it be? They had trucks way back then?"*

*"Isn't that what she said?" Neal replies. "And yes Steve they had trucks way back then!"*

*Steve taps his fingers on the steering wheel as he looks at Neal. "I always say how hard can it be when I've never done something before but I am willing to give it a try! Sorta like this! I have that much confidence in myself to know I can do it. Ergo..."*

*"Ergo?"*

*Steve takes a deep breath. "...How hard can it be? Where did you get this truck anyway?"*

*"From a guy I know."*

*"Friend of yours is he?" Steve asks.*

*"No not really. I saved his ass from being skewered, then put on a spit and barbequed!"*

*"Literally or figuratively?" Steve asks.*

*"Both. They were going to cut his arm off and beat him to death with it. I saved his ass more than once. So he owes me a lot of favors. So that is where I got this truck."*

*"What's the name of that place again?" Steve asks.*

*"A&A Trucking. It's down there on the dock. Big sign. I bet you have seen their slogan before. We move freight like a train!" Neal replies as he uses fingers as the quote sign.*

*"I don't get it." Steve replies. "Do you want some gum?" Steve asks as he holds up a stick of gum.*

*Neal takes it from him. "What's not to get? We move freight like a train! A train! A train is fast!" Neal replies.*

*Steve taps his fingers on the steering again. "Run it down for me again."*

*Neal takes a deep breath. "Friday night or Saturday, depending on when they want us to pick up the freight, then we take it..."*

*"Take it where?"*

*"Well I don't know exactly! Wherever it's supposed to go! Los Angeles, Pomona, Long Beach! Then we come back to Oceanview on Sunday. We get paid four hundred dollars per trip. That's two hundred for me and two hundred for you. And you get to keep your clothes on! Pack a bag with clothes and stuff enough for three days or so..."*

*"I'm going to need more than one bag for that many days." Steve replies. "I have to bring P.J.'S..."*

*"Thanks I appreciate that." Neal replies. "Are you going to bring the ones with the feet? Because I like those the best."*

*Steve laughs at this. "Neal! I don't have any with..." Steve clears his throat. "No I think I might leave those at home. My bathrobe..."*

*"Steve..."*

*"My shampoo and conditioners..."*

*"Steve!"*

*"Brush and..."*

*"STEVE!"*

*"Neal! I am sitting right here you don't have to yell!!" Steve replies.*

*"Yeah right. Okay. Let's practice some more driving because Friday night we're leaving. Okay?" Neal asks.*

*"Bah! We have plenty of time." Steve replies.*

*"Steve there aren't that many hours left in the day!" Neal replies as he points to his watch.*

*"That wasn't very nice! Besides my car is a manual and I have no trouble in driving that!!" Steve points out.*

*"This is different! This takes a little more...more finesse! This truck is a little temperamental." Neal replies.*

*"Kinda like someone else I know!" Steve replies.*

*"Who?"*

*"Never mind! Okay, I'll do this on one condition." Steve replies as he holds up one finger.*

*Neal rubs his eyes. "Yes dear what is it?"*

*"You come and pick me up. I don't want to leave my car down at the docks it's not a good neighborhood." Steve replies.*

*"Alright I'll come by and pick you up. So now can we please have you practice some more?" Neal replies.*

*"Okay."*

*"Start it." Neal prompts and Steve does. "Just take it easy..."*

*Steve pushed down on the clutch and he puts it into first gear and they take off.*

### **A WEEK LATER A&A TRUCKING SATURDAY MORNING:**

*"Okay guys here's your paperwork." The guy in the office replies as he hands Neal the paperwork for their next load.*

*"Bakersfield." Neal replies as he looks at the paperwork.*

*"Yeah same as before. You guys did a good job the first time. No problems. You got there on time. Do that again there's a bonus in it for you."*

*"A bonus?" Steve asks.*

*"Fifty bucks a piece."*

*"A piece? Wow. No problem. We will get it there on time." Neal replies.*

*"Alright see you on Sunday."*

*"Alright thanks." Steve replies as they walk out of the office and go over to their truck which by now was loaded. The door locked securely with a pad lock. Neal climbs up into the driver's side while Steve rides shotgun.*

*"Fifty bucks." Neal replies as he starts the truck.*

*"A piece. They seem anxious." Steve replies.*

*"That they do and we're going to Bakersfield maybe we can kill two birds with one stone. Maybe we can find that address." Neal replies.*

*"You still haven't figure that out yet?" Steve asks.*

*"No I've been busy. I'm doing everything myself. Speaking of which Ruby wanted me to give you this." Neal replies as he reaches into his pocket and he pulls out a Polaroid picture which he hands to Steve.*

*"Awww Neal look how adorable he is! It's Junior! He's gotten so big! What is he holding in his hand?"*

*Neal maneuvers the truck out of the parking lot and into the flow of traffic. "My badge case. He was chewing on it. Now I have his teeth marks with me forever. I am never going to get rid of that badge case."*

*"That's sweet."*

*"Nancy." Neal replies.*

*"Nancy?"*

*"Yeah Nancy. You want the extra money to buy Nancy a present. A ring maybe?" Neal asks as he smiles.*

*Steve scratches his cheek. "No. No ring. Although buying her present is a good idea. But no that isn't it. I'm in a good mood today so I'll give you a hint."*

*"Really?! Go ahead hit me!" Neal replies.*

*"It's not for Nancy but it is for a woman." Steve replies as he smiles.*

*"Damn! Well that certainly narrows it down I must say!" Neal replies as he shakes his head back and forth. "Speaking of women my mother called me the other day."*

*Steve takes a stick of gum out of his pocket and he offers it to Neal who takes it. "She did? Is everything all right?" Steve asks as he pats himself down trying to find another stick of gum.*

*"Oh yeah everything is just dandy."*

*"It doesn't sound so dandy. Let's see she probably told you that she's getting married?"*

*"No although I would probably prefer that to this."*

*"So Neal she's still single?" Steve asks as Neal glances at him.*

*"Seems to me we've had this discussion before. So...you're not asking for yourself right?"*

*"Oh no I mean my dad, Ray."*

*"Uh huh." Neal replies.*

*"They got along pretty good at your wedding. Neal! I just had a thought!" Steve replies happily as he slaps Neal on his arm.*

*"Yeah?" Neal asks just a little leery.*

*"What if my dad and your mom got married?" Steve laughs. "That would be groovy don't ya think! Then we would be related! We would be real brothers!!"*

*"We would be half-brothers." Neal points out. "Like I said I would take that over what she told me any day."*

*"What is it?"*

*"She's going to sell her house and move down here." Neal says slowly.*

*"No! Really? You mean leave the old neighborhood in Hanford and move here! To Oceanview?" Steve laughs. "Oh man I bet you love that."*

*"You know Steve I love my mother but sometimes she drives me crazy. She wants to move down here to be closer to the baby. She wants me to pick a safe neighborhood for her. I mean we could use the help I didn't know babies were such hard work. Let that be another lesson for you!"*

*"Thanks I'll keep that in mind. Hey! Your neighborhood is a safe..."*

*Neal gives Steve a harsh glare. "I don't want her that close by."*

*"It was just a thought." Steve replies as he shrugs. "Doesn't she work for the City of Hanford?"*

*"Yes. Yes she does. She wants to try to get a job with the city here."*

*Steve laughs. "Wow! Luckily it can't be at the Precinct."*

*"Yeah she would have to work someplace else." Neal replies as he yawns. "How about breaking open that thermos full of coffee?"*

*Steve laughs. "Already?" Steve replies as he grabs the thermos and opens it. "Late night?"*

*"Ida came over to watch the baby then Ruby and I went out and had a quiet dinner, some dancing, then we went home and had a romantic interlude for a good hour and a half..." Steve hands Neal the cup of coffee. "...Then Junior woke up." Neal smiles.*

*"It's nice to know there's still sex after marriage." Steve replies.*

*"Yeah see and it just aint you that gets lucky either!" Neal replies as he laughs and yawns.*

*"Why don't you pull over and I'll drive. You can take a nap." Steve asks. "It's daylight." Steve shrugs as he laughs.*

*"You know that is a good idea. There's a rest stop right up here." Neal pulls into the rest stop and he downs the rest of the coffee in the cup then they change places. Neal finds a comfortable position in*

*the passenger seat and after he covers himself with his jacket and pulls his hat down over his face he drops off to sleep. As Steve pulls back onto the highway.*

### **TWO HOURS LATER:**

*The truck was rolling along at a good clip when Neal finally woke up rubbing his neck. Sitting up he puts the hat back up on his head, looking around, blinking. Trying to shield his eyes from the late afternoon sun.*

*“What time is it?”*

*“Two o clock.” Steve replies.*

*“Two o clock?! Why didn’t you wake me up?” Neal asks as he stretches his back then he puts his jacket back on.*

*“You’re joking right? Nothing could wake you up! Even your own snoring couldn’t wake you up!” Steve replies as he glances in the driver side mirror which causes Neal to sit up and look in the passenger side mirror.*

*“Something bugging you?” Neal asks.*

*“I think, no I am sure, we picked up a tail.” Steve replies as he glances in the driver side mirror.*

*“Which one is it?” Neal asks.*

*“The sedan two cars back. I’ve been watching it for the past hour or so.” Steve replies.*

*“Why would anybody want to tail us in this bucket?” Neal asks.*

*“Good question.” Steve replies.*

*“What makes you think they are tailing us?” Neal asks.*

*“Well because we’re going slower than everybody else. Other cars have passed us or they took an exit off the highway. But not these guys. They have been steady. Do me a favor and grab the manifest and take a look at it.” Steve replies.*

*“You think they might hijack us or something?” Neal asks as he reaches for the clipboard hanging behind him.*

*“I don’t know but I don’t like it. I have a bad feeling. What does it say we’re hauling?”*

*Neal looks thru the paperwork. “It doesn’t. The place where you write the description of the load is blank. I don’t remember us having this problem the first time we delivered that load to Long Beach. That paperwork said it was car parts.”*

*“Uh huh. I know how to find out if their tailing us or not.” Steve replies as he looks at Neal.*

*“Take the next exit.” They both say at the same time.*

*And Steve did. No blinker no nothing. No warning. It was wholly in itself an invasive maneuver. The exit was right there so he turned the wheel hard to the right and he took it. Once on the off ramp he shifted gears and gunning it he just barely made the green light at the intersection before it turned red. Making a left turn he headed up the street and again shifting gears he changed lanes.*

*"See anything?" Steve asks.*

*"Nope." Neal replies as he looked in the passenger side mirror.*

*Steve looks at the fuel gauge. "We need fuel."*

*"Get back on the highway. About two miles up the road is a diner and they have diesel fuel. Besides I could eat. You?" Neal asks him.*

*"Yeah I'm hungry. I've never been happier to admit that I was wrong."*

*"No harm no foul." Neal replies.*

*Steve made a U-turn in the parking lot of an abandoned business and once he was going in the right direction again he headed back to the highway. Once on the highway again they made the two miles quickly and once at the diner Steve pulled next to the diesel pump and Neal filled it. After putting more fuel in the truck Steve parked it and they went into the diner.*

*It was the typical diner and by now it was close to three o'clock and the place was a little busy what with the typical mish mash of Saturday travelers which consisted of families, truckers, traveling salesmen, and the like. They found a booth in the back right next to the window with a view of the parking lot. The waitress brings two glasses of ice water for them and two menus and just as Steve opens his menu he catches something out of the corner of his eye.*

*"Neal."*

*Now Neal has heard that tone from Steve before. It was his cop voice. Neal raises his head from the menu and he looks to where Steve is looking. Out in the parking lot. To the sedan that had just pulled up and was now just sitting there. With two men in it. The one that had been tailing them. Now had found their way here.*

*"Coincidence?" Steve asks.*

*"Not hardly."*

*They watch as the two men get out of the car and as they do so they glance at the box truck sitting there then they come into the diner. They find a booth on the far side of the room. The waitress comes back to them and they order. Cheeseburgers and French fries. Two cokes. Steve gets up and he puts money in the jukebox. They make small talk waiting for their food to arrive. When it does it gives them something to do. They can see the men in the booth across the room eating. Every so often the one facing them would glance in their direction.*

*Steve puts his hand up to his cheek that faces the two men, also covering his mouth as he looks down at the table reaching for another French fry.*

*"I have an idea."*

*"I'm listening." Neal replies.*

*"I need you to distract them while I..."*

*After Steve runs it down for him he takes his wallet out of his pocket and he gives Neal some money to pay for half of the diesel fuel, his half of the meal and then Steve leaves a tip on the table. They both get up from the table at the same time which caught the attention of the men at the far table. They watch as Steve heads down the hall toward the bathroom and as Neal goes to the cashier and pays. After getting the receipt he heads for the door like he's going to leave then he suddenly stops and turns around walking quickly up to the table where the men are sitting. One of them trying to get up until Neal stops him.*

*"Sit down." Neal replies as he leans on the table. Trying not to raise his voice since he didn't want to cause a ruckus in this crowded place. The man complies as he drops back down into the seat.*

*"You're following us! Why?" Neal asks with just a hint of irritation.*

*One of the men laugh. "It's not against the law is it?"*

*"Or is it?" The other man asks seriously as he looks knowingly at Neal.*

*"Look at it this way....Neal." The first man replies as he now stands up which makes Neal take a step back as he looks at him. "He and I..." The man points to the other man at the table who by now has also stood up. "...We're your life insurance policy."*

*"Life insurance policy?" Neal repeats.*

*"Yeah. We insure that you deliver that load to where it's supposed to go..."*

*"...And the payoff is, you and your buddy there, get to keep living. Understand?"*

*"Neal? Are these guys hassling you?" Steve asks as he comes up beside him with his hands on his hips.*

*Neal doesn't take his eyes off of the man in front of him as he answers Steve's question. "Na. No hassle here. Right boys?"*

*"None whatsoever. That is...just so long as we understand each other? Right Neal?" The man replies as he puts his hand on Neal's shoulder as he smiles at him.*

*"And you two do what you're told." The other man replies.*

*With his hands still on his hips Steve takes a step in between Neal and the man who has his hand on Neal's shoulder. Steve looks at him his eyes never leaving his face. "Don't....touch...him." Steve replies slowly and with his voice low so only the four of them can hear him. "I'm the only one....that gets to do that."*

*The man still looking at Steve takes his hand off of Neal's shoulder as he says. "Territorial aren't we?"*

*"Come on Neal lets go." Steve replies as he gently pushes the man out of the way. Neal looks back at them as he falls into step behind Steve who leads the way to the door. Once outside Steve jumps into the driver's seat as Neal rides shotgun. Steve starts the truck then he puts it into reverse.*

*"Did he say if we do what we're told?" Steve asks Neal as he backs out of the parking space.*

*"Yeah. He doesn't know us very well does he?" Neal replies as he shakes his head.*

*"I should say not." Steve replies.*

*How many?" Neal asks him.*

*"The two rear tires." Steve replies as he shifts into first gear as he pulls onto the highway then easily into second. "They're going to be hard pressed to find a place to replace two slashed tires late on a Saturday afternoon." Steve replies as he looks at Neal. "It was just sheer luck that bathroom had a window."*

*"Uh huh."*

*"I don't think we have to worry about them anymore. What?" Steve replies.*

*Neal scratches his head as he looks out the window. "They wanted to make sure we delivered this load. So that tells me they had trouble before. With somebody else....before." Neal replies as he looks at him.*

*"You don't think?"*

*"Yeah, yeah I do." Neal replies.*

*"Ivan? But we don't even know who he drove for? And technically we aren't even conducting an investigation we're just..."*

*"Moonlighting." Neal replies.*

*"Yeah something like that." Steve replies.*

*Neal sits up straighter in the seat. "What if Ivan was doing some moonlighting himself?"*

*"He did say in his letter he had a plan to make money. A lot of money." Steve replies.*

*Neal laughs. "Not by just driving a truck I bet. You and I both know how you start out to do one thing and it ends up...being another thing. Right?"*

*"And that other thing can get you killed."*

*"Exactly." Neal replies. "Sometimes good intentions aren't enough."*

*"Like in Ivan's case." Steve replies as he looks in the driver's side mirror. "In a few hours we're be in Bakersfield then we can deliver this, whatever it is to the warehouse. Then we can wash our hands of it."*

*"When we get there let's find a newspaper and see what movies are playing. Have you seen Jaws?" Neal asks him.*

*"Nope. This time let's get a Motel room with twin beds." Steve replies.*

*"Why?"*

*"Because you steal the covers that's why!" Steve replies.*

*"No I don't!" Neal replies.*

***“Yes you do!”***

***“Alright then you use all the towels!!” Neal counters.***

***“Last time I got extra towels! And that doesn’t negate the fact that you are a cover stealer!!”***

***“Negate?! You have cold feet!” Neal replies.***

***“Yes because you steal the covers!!”***

***Neal gestures. “It’s going to be dark soon. Want me to drive?”***

***“No I think I should try driving at night this time. Do me a favor. There’s a transistor radio in my bag get it out and see if we can pick up any stations.”***

***Neal pulls Steve’s bag out from under the seat and Neal opens it and he finds the radio. Turning it on, he turns the dial so far finding nothing but static. But then after a few tries they suddenly hear a DJ’s voice. “You’re listening to the voice of Antelope Valley KDOL now back to the music.”***

### **AWHILE LATER:**

***It was dusk. The sky lit up by the brilliant colors of the setting sun as they begin to cross the desert. As daylight faded around them so did the traffic. They were happily bouncing along in the truck, singing to the songs on the radio. Enjoying the beauty of the sunset. No one passing them and no one approaching them on the opposite side of the roadway. For all intent purposes they thought they were the only vehicle on the road that is until...***

***The incessant and intrusive blowing of a car horn. Behind them. Steve looks in the driver side mirror. Behind them he can see headlights of a fast approaching car coming up behind them. Racing to catch up to them. Flashing their headlights at them.***

***“What in the hell?” Neal replies as he looks into the passenger side mirror.***

***In the next second the driver of the car, still leaning on the horn, goes around them and when the car gets right next to them the passenger rolls down the passenger side window.***

***“Pull over!! Now!”***

***“What did he say?” Neal asks.***

***“It’s those same two guys from the diner! They want us to pull over!”***

***“Don’t do it! Where did they get that car?” Neal replies.***

***“I don’t know.” Steve rolls down the driver’s side window yelling at them. “You can kiss my ass! We’re not going to pull over!!”***

***“I said pull over!!” The passenger yells louder as he brings a shotgun into view and he points it at Steve. “Pull over!”***

***“Neal! He’s got a shotgun! Hang on!!”***

***Neal using both hands holds onto the door handle as Steve, grips the steering wheel tightly, turns the steering wheel of the truck to the left meaning to hit them broadside but the driver of the car was quicker. He nimbly steered the car to the left to get out of his path. Again the passenger raises the shotgun in Steve’s direction and once again Steve steers the truck to the left trying to make another attempt at broadsiding them. Once again the driver of the car is quicker and he steers the car to the left and as Steve watches, the driver guns it, the car jumps and with tires spinning it clears the front of the truck.***

***As the car jumps ahead of them Steve and Neal watch the car’s tail lights moving fast up the highway into the gloom.***

***“Son of a bitch! I can’t believe those morons were going to shoot at us!” Neal replies.***

***“Me either! Neal look!”***

***Steve points as he continues to drive. Up ahead they watched as the tail lights of the car had retreated a good distance up the highway. Now they watch the tail lights of the car as it drives up onto the shoulder. They watch the tail lights disappear as the car flips a u turn. Sluicing from side to side causing a cloud of dirt from the spinning tires. Headed back in their direction. The driver gunning the engine. The headlights on bright.***

***“Shit!” Neal exclaims.***

***The car was moving at a high rate of speed. They could hear the engine racing as the car headed in their direction. Steve shifted gears.***

***“Steve what are you going to do?”***

***“They want to play chicken Neal. Let’s give them chicken!!” Steve replies as he shifts gears again. “Hang on!”***

***Steve shifts for the last time. The truck now at its highest rate of speed possible. It groans at the high rate of speed it was forced into enduring. Threatening to come apart at the seams. The headlights of the car getting closer by the second. The distance between them quickly dissolving. By now they were both riding the center line. The sound of the truck engine loud in Steve’s ears. In the darkness they saw the flash of the shotgun as it was fired in their direction the sound came later. Bouncing off of the pavement.***

***“Get down!” Neal yells as he dives down onto the floorboard and Steve ducks down as far as he could and still being able to hold onto the steering wheel. The shotgun shell tore thru the center of the windshield, raining glass down on both of them. Continuing thru the cab of the truck and like a hot knife thru butter it easily tore thru the metal of the box truck behind them. Steve raises his head and he looks to see the car at the last possible second before disaster struck veer off to the right at a high rate of speed and pass them. Flying up the highway.***

***“Neal are you alright?” Steve asks as Neal brushes the glass out of his hair.***

***“I think so. You?”***

*"Yeah I think so. Uh oh!" Steve replies as he looks in the driver's side mirror.*

*"What?" Neal replies as he looks in the passenger side mirror.*

*"Their coming back!" Steve replies.*

*"Holy fucking shit! Those guys are persistent!"*

*From the driver's side mirror Steve watched the headlights in the darkness as the car flipped another u turn in the middle of the highway. They could hear the engine racing as the car ate up the distance between them. Steve as he drove watched them in the driver's side mirror.*

*"Come on! Come on! You son of a..."*

*Steve was waiting for the last possible moment. Either they were going to end it, the goons in that car, or Steve was going to end it. And he prefer it be them. This truck was bigger than that car and all Steve had to do was wait until the car was in the perfect position.*

*"Come on!" Steve yells loudly at them.*

*The car caught up to them and he could see their headlights in the driver side mirror, now all he had to do was gauge it just right. He was waiting for them to get right alongside of them, about middle of the truck, and when he thought they were in the right position he turned the steering quickly to the left.*

*This time the driver of the car didn't react and the second time Steve hit him broadside it was a harder hit. The sound of metal on metal was deafening. The second hit sent the car careening off to the left. Traveling at a high rate of speed the car crossed the rest of the highway and because of the darkness Steve and Neal couldn't see what it had hit. But it had hit some sort of obstacle because it had become airborne. They only knew that from watching the red of the tail lights make at least two full revolutions, high in the air. Dirt flying. The metal of the car screaming in protest. Then the hand of gravity sent it plummeting hard to the ground. When it landed the ground shook from the impact. The headlights of the car rocking back and forth as the car landed on its roof. The headlights illuminating the field that it came to rest in.*

*Steve had to drive up the road a little ways so he could slow down. He made a u turn in the middle of the highway then he headed back to the scene of the accident. He parked the truck so the headlights were shining on the wreckage. Neal opened the passenger side door as he jumped down to the pavement. Steve got out on the driver side and he stood there watching Neal as he ran across the field to the car. Which by now was smoking. Steve could see Neal getting down on his knees to check on the driver.*

*Then getting up he walked over to the passenger who was thrown from the car. Neal gets down on one knee next to him as he checks his pulse at his neck. Neal drops his head as he slowly gets up brushing the knees of his pants off as he walks back to the truck.*

*"Dead. We need to get on the CB and call the Sheriff. Hey what are you doing?" Neal asks as he sees Steve reach behind the seat on the driver side and take out a pair of bolt cutters.*

*"After." Steve replies as he hands Neal the flashlight.*

*"After what?" Neal asks.*

*Steve holds the bolt cutters between his legs as he puts on a pair of gloves. "After I cut this lock off. I want to see what all the fuss is about!"*

*Following Steve to the back of the truck Neal shines the flashlight at the corner of the truck, when the shotgun shell made its final exit. Then once at the back Neal holds the flashlight on the lock as Steve cuts it in two with the bolt cutters. After the lock fell to the ground Steve turn the handle on the door and he raised it up. Neal shines the flashlight in the back of the truck. In the course of the chase across the highway the boxes that had been stacked neatly in the back of the truck were now off their pallet. Lying all over the back of the truck. One of the boxes had even managed to come open scattering smaller boxes from it across the bed of the truck.*

*Steve and Neal climb up into the back of the truck and as Neal held the flashlight Steve moved the box that had come open. They squatted down next to each other Neal holding the flashlight as Steve picked up one of the smaller boxes that had come from it. Steve opens it and they both stare at it. Then they look at one another. They then both look back to the box. Neal scratches his head.*

*"Is this it?" Neal asks.*

*"It can't be it. There has to be something else." Steve replies.*

*Neal holds one up as they exam it in the glare of the flashlight. "It's sticks of chewing gum." Neal replies.*

*"Maybe, you know, there's something else in the bottom of the big boxes and the boxes of gum is hiding it. What do you think?" Steve asks him.*

*"Well there's only one way to find out." Neal replies as they both look back over their shoulders at the boxes pile there.*

### **AN HOUR LATER:**

*"Nothing! Absolutely positively nothing!" Neal replies as he tapes the next to the last box shut then he tosses it to Steve who places it on the pallet. "It was all gum. Who goes to all this trouble for just gum?" Neal replies.*

*"Before you seal that last box hand me one of those small boxes of gum."*

*Neal just looks at him.*

*Steve shrugs. "I'm fresh out."*

*Neal tosses it to him and Steve puts it in his jacket pocket. "Thanks."*

*"The sheriff should be here shortly. Look lights." Neal replies as he points off in the distance to the lights and sirens headed in their direction.*

*"How do we explain this to the sheriff?" Steve replies.*

*Neal shrugs. "We have all our credentials with us. We just tell him the truth. We're off duty cops moonlighting. And those two guys out there were intent on hijacking us. We just leave the part out about us hauling gum." Neal goes box to sealing the last box then he tosses it to Steve who places it on the pallet. They jumped down out of the back of the truck Steve pulling the door down into place behind him.*

*"How do we lock it back?" Neal asks.*

*"I think I saw an extra padlock in the glove box. By the way I'm freezing. I'm going to see if I can find something to patch that hole in the windshield. It should hold until we get to Bakersfield. Then I'm going to start the truck and warm it up." Steve replies.*

*"I'm going to smoke. Turn the headlights on so they can see us."*

*"Okay." Steve replies as he starts to walk away.*

*"Oh Steve."*

*"Yeah?"*

*"I think we just lost our 50 dollar bonus." Neal replies as he holds up his watch. "We're late."*

*Steve shrugs. "Que sera, sera." Then he turns and walks back to the truck and Neal laughs as he shakes his head.*

### **THREE HOURS LATER IN BAKERSFIELD:**

*To Steve and Neal it seems they must have talked to at least a billion people at the scene of the accident. The Sheriff, The Highway Patrol, The Coroner, and the local police. And every time a new agency showed up they had to tell their story all over again. The Sheriff and everybody else bought their attempted hi-jacking story. But why wouldn't they? It seems according to the Sheriff and the other powers that be, this stretch of desert highway was a magnet for hi-jackers of everything freight like. So were they surprised to see this happen to Steve and Neal? No not really. All the agencies that responded gave them paperwork to fill out...in triplicate of course. Then they shook hands all around. Some war stories were traded. Cups of coffee were drunk and even though it's a cliché and a horrendous stereotype...there were also...donuts.*

*So now after all of that, three hours later, they were finally on their way to Bakersfield. Neal was driving this round as Steve slept in the seat next to him. And Neal had it running at the highest gear possible. To try and make up some time. Steve had managed to find some cardboard and duct tape to cover the hole in the windshield. At least temporary.*

*By now they had crossed the expanse of the desert in record time. The battered and beaten box truck chugging along. By now they were still an hour away from Bakersfield. The sun was up and so was*

*Steve. He ran his fingers thru his hair, then he stretched and yawned and he poured himself the last cup of coffee from the thermos. After he drank the coffee he began patting himself down looking for some gum. Then he hit the pack of gum that was in his pocket. He took the pack of gum out. He looked at it. Then he unwrapped it and he put the stick of gum in his mouth. He slapped Neal on his arm and when Neal looked at him Steve held up another piece of gum. Neal shook his head no. Steve shrugged and he put the pack back in his pocket.*

*Steve was the co-pilot. He was looking at the street map of Bakersfield and giving Neal directions to the Industrial District where the warehouse was located. Since it was a Sunday morning there was little traffic and they found their way there with no trouble. Neal backed up to the loading dock of the warehouse and he honked the horn. As Neal was watching in the driver's side mirror for the guy inside to raise the door Steve suddenly leans over and he honks the horn. Not once or twice. But in quick succession.*

*"Neal!! Name that tune!!" Steve replies as he laughs.*

*Then suddenly the guy from the warehouse appears next to the truck on Neal's side.*

*"Hey!! Lay off the horn I heard you the first time!! You guys are late!! Let me see your paperwork!!"*

*Neal glances over at Steve who by now was making a huge paper airplane out of the map as he picks the clipboard up from the floor and he carries it with him as he gets out of the truck.*

*Neal hands the clipboard to him. "What took you guys so long?"*

*Neal gestures to the truck. "We had an accident."*

*"The boxes weren't damaged were they?" The guy asks concerned.*

*"No we're fine!! Thanks for asking!! I don't know!! The door is locked!!" Neal replies as he raises his arms in the air. "Oh yeah you know I almost forgot..." Neal replies as he snaps his fingers. "I could have looked thru that big gaping hole behind us that was caused by that shotgun that was fired at us thru the windshield!!" Neal replies as he raises his voice. "I totally forgot about that!!"*

*The man looks at Neal. "All your paperwork seems to be in order. After I take look at the delivery I'll get you your money."*

*"Wonderful. Oh by the way we're going to need a Motel. Is there one close by here? Also do you know anybody who could put in a new windshield? I would like to get that fixed before we head back for Oceanview?"*

*"Yeah there's the Motor Coach Motel about three miles up that way and as for the windshield, yeah, I have a buddy who can fix it."*

*"We going to need some transportation..." Neal replies.*

*"I have a pickup truck I can loan to you to use for as long as you're in Bakersfield."*

*"You will? Well that's nice of you." Neal replies.*

*"Uh huh."*

*"Just take the cost of the windshield and the truck out of my half of the money, okay?"*

*"Two bucks a day for the use of the truck?" The guy asks.*

*Neal thinks about this. "Yeah that seems fair." Then they shake hands as the big paper airplane that Steve had made out of the map comes sailing out of the driver's side of the truck with Steve following after it.*

*"Is your buddy alright?" The guy asks as he nods in Steve's direction.*

*"Steve? Oh yeah, he's just a little stir crazy from being cooped up in the truck." Neal replies.*

*"I think he's just crazy period. Don't look now but I think he's hugging that tree?" The man replies as he points and Neal looks over his shoulder at him. "I'll take care of him...Ah..." Neal replies as he scratches his head.*

*"Yeah I'll take care of the truck." The replies as he turns and walks off looking back at Steve over his shoulder.*

*Neal turns around with his hands on his hips as he slowly walks over to the tree that Steve seems to be hugging.*

*Neal speaks softly to him. "Steve, old man, what are you doing?"*

*Steve then turns around quickly. "Neal!! Neal! It's nature!! Isn't it beautiful!! See look!" Steve bends over and he picks up a handful of acorns. "Look! Look! At all of these...whatever they are!! Big trees come out of these!! Isn't that amazing?!"*

*"Yeah Steve it is. You might want to put those down they could be from a squirrels nut stash or something. You don't want a pissed off squirrel coming after you."*

*Steve laughs. Hysterically. As he drops the acorns back on the ground. "I love this tree!!" Steve replies as he hugs it again. Neal then goes over and he takes Steve by his arm, tugging and pulling him, away from the tree.*

*"Steve do you feel alright?"*

*"Me?" Steve asks as he points to himself.*

*"No the guy standing behind you!" Neal replies.*

*Steve turns to look behind him. "Neal! There's nobody there!"*

*Neal grabs him, turning him to face him, then he puts his hands up on Steve's face holding his head. "Steve look at me." Neal replies as he looks Steve in his eyes. "Holy...Steve you're flying!!"*

*"No!!! No I'm not flying you silly! I'm standing right here!!" Steve replies as he hops around.*

*"Steve what have you been doing!? Sniffing diesel fumes! You're higher than a kite!! Come on what did you take?"*

*"Neal! What are you talking about? The only thing I took was some gum. Bleech! It tasted awful!" Steve replies as he makes a face.*

*"Spit it out!" Neal yells at him as he shakes him.*

*"Stop it Neal! I can't spit it out! I swallowed it." Steve replies.*

*Neal looks at him. "Steve! Why did you do that?"*

*"Because of that." Steve points to a sign that is behind them on a pole and Neal turns his head to look at it.*

***"NO LITTERING! CITY ORDINANCE."***

*"So you see I couldn't spit it out. I couldn't break, you know, the law?"*

*Neal drops his head. "Oh Steve. Okay. Can you do something for me?"*

*"Sure."*

*"I going to take you over to that pick-up truck right there." Neal points to the truck. "And I you want you to sit in it like a good boy while I take our stuff out of the truck and load it in the back of the pick-up. Okay? Think you can do that?" Neal asks.*

*"Oh yeah sure no problem!!" Steve starts to walk off by himself and takes a few steps when he stumbles and Neal has to catch him before he hits the pavement.*

*"Easy."*

*Neal walks him over to the pick-up and after opening the passenger side door for him he helps Steve to get in then before he shuts the door he locks it then he shuts it. Where the pick-up is parked Neal can keep an eye on him as he goes about retrieving all their stuff from the cab of the truck and transferring it to the bed of the pick-up. Just as Neal finished the guy comes back out of the warehouse and he hands Neal two envelopes and the keys to the truck.*

*"Here's your money. Yours is minus the truck repairs and the rental of the pick-up. I also put my number in there so you can call and check on the truck."*

*"Thanks. So you said there's a Motel up the road?" Neal asks.*

*"Yeah The Motor Coach Motel three miles up the road. Just stay on that road right there you can't miss it. It also has a diner. It stays open 24 hours. It's mainly for truckers. Pretty or quaint it ain't" The man replies as he laughs.*

*Neal smiles. "That's okay. Thanks again."*

*"See ya." The man replies as he turns and walks off.*

*Neal walks back to the pick-up to find Steve sitting in the driver's seat turning the steering wheel back and forth. Back and forth.*

*"Neal can I drive?! Huh!! Can I?!!! Please! My grandfather had a truck just like this!! With the three on the....on the...?"*

*"Tree." Neal replies.*

*"TREE!!!" Steve replies loudly as he tries to open the driver's side door to get out but Neal blocks it.*

***“Take it easy there Euell Gibbons. How can you drive when you don’t even know where we’re going?”***

***“Oh yeah!!!” Steve replies.***

***“I’ll let you drive it later okay?” Neal replies.***

***“Promise?” Steve asks him.***

***“Cross my heart.” Neal crosses his heart then he raises his right hand. “Now go ahead and slide over for me.”***

***Steve slides over to the passenger side then Neal gets in.***

***It had to be, at least for Neal, the longest three mile drive of his life. It was all Neal could do to keep Steve contained and still be able to drive. Steve rolled down the window of the truck and immediately stuck his head out. His hair being blow back by the wind.***

***“Neal!!! Smell the air! It’s wonderful! So fresh!”***

***“Steve that’s oil refinery’s that you’re smelling. Get your head back in the truck before you get all sort of shit in your eyes!” Neal replies as he grabs Steve by his jacket.***

***And so it went until they got to the Motel. Once there Neal parked in front of the office and not wanting to leave Steve by himself in the truck because he was afraid that Steve wouldn’t be there when he got back. They went in together.***

***Neal went to the counter pulling Steve with him.***

***“Oh Neal look a gumball machine!! Look at all the colors!! So pretty.” Steve replies as he makes a move to go over to it but Neal stops him. Grabbing ahold of his belt loop he pulls him back.***

***“Down boy! No you don’t! Stand right here.” Neal replies.***

***“Help you two?” The man behind the counter asks them as he glances at Steve.***

***“Yeah we need a room. One with twin beds if you got it.”***

***He turns around and looks at the keys hanging a board. “No just queen beds left.”***

***“Ah shoot! He’s going to steal my covers again!!” Steve replies.***

***Neal rubs his forehead as the man looks at Steve. “We’re take it. On the ground floor if you have it.”***

***“Yeah.” The man behind the counters picks a key and he puts it on the counter. “Sign the register.”***

***Neal signs it then Steve snatches the pen out of Neal’s hand and he writes in the register with a flourish and when he finishes he hands the pen back to the man. The man spins the register around and he reads it. “Neal Schon and Euell Gibbons?”***

***Neal looks over at Steve who by now is leaning on the counter just to keep standing up. Neal spins the register around and crosses out Euell Gibbons and writes Steve’s name. “Sorry.”***

***“How long?” The man asks.***

***“Tuesday.” Then Neal looks over at Steve. “Better make it Wednesday.”***

*"Okay. That will be 32.00 dollars. The diner next door is open 24 hours."*

*"Uh huh." Neal takes out his wallet and counts out thirty two dollars. Then out of the corner of his eye he sees Steve slowly start to sink to the floor then he reaches out and puts his arm around him to hold him up.*

*"Neal I'm so tired."*

*"What's wrong with him?"*

*"Nothing. He's sick that's all."*

*"Is he sick...or is he sick?" The man looks at Neal.*

*"The flu. He has the flu." Neal replies.*

*The man looks hard at them. "I don't want any trouble. No low life's hanging around. No cops showing up. This is a good Motel. Not like some you're find out this way."*

*"Cops!! Cops!! Who called the cops!! Neal! We're the cops! Aren't we Neal? Badges! We have to show our badges!!"*

*"What's he saying?"*

*"Nothing. He's delirious. You won't have any trouble. He has the flu that's all. I'll take care of him. Can you do me a favor?"*

*"Maybe what?" He asks as he looks at Steve again who by now has his head resting on his arm.*

*"Here's five more dollars. I can't leave him. If you could go to the diner for me and get two big pots of coffee. The stronger the better and some sugar. And oh yeah extra towels."*

*"Sure I can do that." The man replies as he takes the five dollars. Room 6. Last one on the end." The man replies handing Neal the keys.*

*"Thanks."*

*Neal takes the key and with his arm around Steve he helps him out to the truck then they drive down to Room 6. Neal was able to park right out front and after unlocking the door and grabbing the bags and putting them in the room he helped Steve out of the truck.*

*Neal sat Steve on the bed and the minute he turned away to lock the door Steve had fallen back onto the bed. Neal took off his jacket and he kicked off his shoes then he goes over and he grabs Steve by his arm and he pulls him upright. Then he slaps his face hard. Back and forth.*

*"Come on Steve! Wake up! Stay with me kiddo."*

*Steve jerks awake trying to bat his hand away. "I'm so tired. I want to go to sleep. Leave me alone!"*

*"No can do." Neal replies as he starts to take off Steve's jacket then once it was off he pitches it onto the bed. "You can't go to sleep. Not just yet. You might not wake up."*

*"No! I have been waking up all these years! Neal what are you doing?"*

*"This one time might be the exception to the rule. I'm taking your clothes off." Neal replies as he manages to get Steve's shoes and socks off.*

*"Why? Neal I love you but not in that way!" Then Steve starts to laugh.*

*"That's good Steve stay with me." Neal replies as he lifts Steve to his feet then he puts Steve's arm around his neck and then Neal puts his arm around Steve's waist as he drags walks him to the bathroom.*

*"Where are we going?"*

*"Steve remember when we were six and we took that bath together?"*

*Steve nods his head. "Uh huh."*

*"Well now we're going to take a shower together."*

*"Neal! With our clothes on! No! I don't want to!" Steve replies as Neal walks him to the tub. "No!"*

*Steve tries his best to fight against him but he can't. Steve clings to him as Neal scoops him up and he steps into the tub with him. Setting him back on his feet Neal holds him up as he reaches for the cold water handle and he turns it on full blast. Steve lets out a loud yell of protest as the cold water hits him then Neal shoves him further under the water. The cold water cascading down his head causing Steve to gasp and sputter.*

*Steve tries to fight against him but Neal is holding him too tight. "Neal!!! Neal!!! Holy Shit!! Let me go!! The water! It's freezing!"*

*"That's the general idea." Neal replies as he is able to turn Steve around, his hands now holding Steve's crossed arms over his chest, with his back up against him as he holds him. The cold water running over both of them.*

*"Stop it!! Stop it!! Neal!!! I hate you!!" Steve replies as he tries to butt Neal with the back of his head.*

*"Good! Hate me!! Fight! Fight me! Try to get away! Try!"*

*"Neal!! Please! You're hurting me!!! Let me go!!" Steve by now begs him.*

*Steve kicks him in the shin as he tries to pry his arms away from him. Fighting against him. Neal holds him tighter. The clothes they're wearing are now soaking wet. Their hair plastered down to their heads. Until Steve finally stops fighting. Whatever energy Steve had left was spent. Neal feels him relax as he starts to breathe harder. Finally letting Neal do to him whatever it is he's going to do. Both of them standing under the water.*

*"Cold." Steve replies as he rests his head back on Neal's shoulder.*

*"I know we're almost done. You have to wake up." Neal replies.*

*They stand there for another 15 minutes. Neal holding tight to Steve as the cold water continues to come down over them. And when Neal thought Steve had enough he turned off the water and he helps him out of the tub.*

### **AN HOUR AND HALF LATER:**

*After Neal changed his clothes and he helped Steve changed his that is when Neal started to pour cups of hot, black coffee down Steve's throat. Then they started walking. Walking across the floor of the Motel room. From one end to the other. Neal holding onto Steve's belt from the bathrobe he was wearing. Steve's arm draped over Neal's neck as he held onto his hand.*

*"Shut up! Hasn't anybody ever told you that your voice is annoying!?" Steve replies.*

*"You used to tell me that you liked the sound of my voice." Neal replies.*

*"I lied!!"*

*Neal smiles. "Tell you what let's do something different. How about a cup of coffee!!" Neal replies.*

*"No!! Holy Shit!! I can't drink anymore coffee!!"*

*"Yeah sure you can." Neal walks him over to the table where the coffee pots are sitting and he pours Steve another cup of coffee then he holds it up to his mouth. "Come on Steve just a little more."*

*"Ugh! It's cold!" Steve replies as he tries to push Neal's hand away.*

*"Want to hear another story?" Neal asks he pushes the coffee at Steve.*

*"If you going to run off at the mouth tell me again why we do this."*

*"Drink all of this first and I will." Neal replies.*

*Steve just looks at him as he takes the coffee cup from him and he downs it then he gives the cup back to Neal.*

*"Happy?" Steve replies.*

*"Okay." Neal replies as they start to walk across the floor again. "We are that thin blue line that separates the prey from the predator. We protect the people of Oceanview. We...."*

*"Neal. I...I don't feel so good. I think I'm going to be sick!"*

*"That's a good sign." Neal replies as he quickly walks Steve over to the bathroom and he lets him go as Steve finds his own way to the toilet. While Steve is sick in the bathroom he turns down the covers on the bed for him.*

*"Feeling better?" Neal asks him as he comes out of the bathroom holding his stomach.*

*"No not really...I" Steve doesn't finish because he rushes back to the bathroom. In the space of that afternoon Steve must've thrown up at least three or maybe it was four times. Neal lost count. Finally Steve was able to come out of the bathroom and Neal helped him walk over to the bed and after Steve got under the covers Neal covered him up. Then he put a trash can by the bed.*

*"I'm freezing!!" Steve replies as he grabs the covers and he pulls them up to his neck shivering. Neal then gets on the bed next to Steve and taking the pillows he props them up against the headboard. He then lays back against the pillows then he grabs Steve under the arms and he pulls him up to him. He*

*rearranges the covers over him as he puts his arms around him and he holds him. Giving some of his warmth to him.*

*"You're be warm soon." Neal replies.*

*"You going to catch it too." Steve replies his teeth still chattering.*

*"Catch what?"*

*"The flu. Moron." Steve replies.*

*Neal smiles. "Oh I think I'm going to be alright. You too."*

*Steve yawns. "I'm so tired. Can I go to sleep now?"*

*"Yeah, yeah I think so. I'm going to stay right here. I want to make sure..."*

*Steve closes his eyes he rests his head on Neal's chest. "That'll I'll wake up..."*

*"Yeah...that you'll wake up." Neal replies.*

*"I'm so sleepy." Steve replies as he drifts off to sleep.*

*"I'll be right here when you wake up."*

### **EARLY MONDAY MORNING:**

*When Neal woke up he was covered by the sheets and a blanket his arm draped over Steve who was still sound asleep. Looking around he remembered where he was. He must've been a lot more tired than what he thought he was. Rubbing his eyes he sat up slightly on his elbow, pulling the covers back as he looked down at Steve. Then he put his hand on Steve's chest waiting for it to rise and fall. Listening as he took a breath or two. When he was satisfied that Steve was now all right he slowly made his way over to the far side of the bed. And he got up.*

*Neal first checked the trash can. Steve was not sick in the night. A good sign. The crisis had passed. Neal managed to take a hot shower and even make a few phone calls to Ruby and the Captain and Steve slept through it all. Neal left a very detailed note stating the fact of where he was going. Making sure that the envelope he had brought with him was still in his pocket then before he left he made sure that Steve was well covered, then and only then he left the Motel room.*

*The first stop was the diner for breakfast then onto the Bakersfield police station. He reasoned if anybody knew anything about this address on the envelope then it would be the police. And Neal was correct in his first endeavor. Neal left the police station with very specific directions on how to get to the place.*

### **PROCTOR LABS OF BAKERSFIELD:**

*And now this is where he sits. Neal is sitting in line. Actually it was the line at the security checkpoint to get into the facility. One line was for employees while the other was for visitors. Neal was one of those numbers. Looking around Neal couldn't believe it. This looked like operations at a government facility. And Neal didn't think this was a government facility or was it? Armed security checking badges and what not. Neal was next so he rolled up and he rolled down his window to talk to the officer.*

*"Good morning sir. Who are you here to see today?"*

*"Well I'm not really sure." Neal replies as he takes out his badge and shows it to him. "You see I'm with Oceanview Police Homicide..."*

*And that was all it took because Neal was told parked there and he was ushered in and told to wait here which he did. He didn't have to wait long before a man walked up to him, wearing a lab coat, and he shook Neal's hand.*

*"I'm Doctor Greg Turbin. I'm the Director of Proctor Labs. How can I help you today....ah..."*

*"Oh sorry. Neal. Neal Schon. Homicide Detective from Oceanview. Here's my badge." Neal replies as he shows it to him.*

*"Yes. Aren't you just a little out of your jurisdiction Detective? You're not here to arrest somebody are you?" He asks.*

*"No. At least I don't think I am. As for being out of my jurisdiction I'm conducting a homicide investigation back in Oceanview and our victim received a letter from here. "I want to see what that letter was." Neal hands him the envelope. "That is your envelope isn't it?"*

*"Yes, yes it is. Ivan Gunter. Yes I do know that name. Follow me."*

*Neal falls into step beside him. "That back there at the checkpoint?" Neal asks as he points back over his shoulder. "Is that an everyday thing?"*

*"Oh yes you see we do very sensitive testing here. Analysis and such."*

*"Medical testing?" Neal asks.*

*"No. Mainly industrial. Chemical and some biological."*

*"Is this Lab open to the general public? I mean can any Joe Blow off of the street come in here with something and have it analyze?"*

*"As a general rule no but you see I knew Mr. Gunter."*

*They continue to talk as Neal follows him down a hall to an office where he goes up to the Secretary's desk. "Karen could you find me Mr. Gunter's file please and bring it into the office."*

*"Yes Doctor." Karen replies.*

*Neal follows the Doctor into his office. "Please sit anywhere."*

*Neal chooses a chair in front of the desk while the Doctor pours them a cup of coffee. "Sugar or cream?"*

*"Sugar please." Neal replies. "You said that you knew Mr. Gunter?" Neal replies as he takes the coffee from him.*

*"Yes not very well but every time I went to the bar he was there."*

*"The bar?" Neal stops drinking his coffee. "You don't mean the Russian Lounge? In Oceanview?"*

*"Yes. Unless there is another one around here." The Doctor replies.*

*"Isn't that a long way to go to just go to a bar?" Neal asks.*

*The Doctor smiles. "Yes it would be except my father lives in Oceanview. I go down on Fridays to visit him, spend the weekend, you see my father is from Russia and he loves to go to that bar. It's the only place that he can get real Russian cooking. I met Ivan there. It seems that my father was talking a lot about his son, the Doctor."*

*Neal smiles. "Proud of you is he?"*

*"Oh yes you could say that. It's to the point of being embarrassing." The Doctor smiles.*

*"So Ivan knew what you did for a living?" Neal replies.*

*"Yes he did. So one day, last month I believe it was, he shows up here..."*

*"Doctor here's the file." Karen replies as she comes into the room and hands it to him.*

*"Thank you. Yes last month." The Doctor replies as he runs his finger down the paperwork. "I was surprised to see him of course."*

*"How did he seem to you?" Neal asks him.*

*"Well maybe a little nervous. Excited. He insisted on seeing me in private. He asked me for a favor."*

*"And that would have been what?" Neal asks.*

*"He gave me four pieces of chewing gum. He wanted me to analyze them for him."*

*"Chewing gum? Don't you think that's a little, oh I don't know, strange?" Neal asks.*

*"Well maybe to other people but no, you see that's the business I'm in. And besides my father told him that I could help him out." The Doctor smiles as he shakes his head.*

*Neal laughs. "Parents. Didn't you ask him why he wanted them analyzed?"*

*"Yes of course I did but he wouldn't tell me or he couldn't tell me. It seemed to me that he wasn't sure what he was looking for. He did tell me that he hadn't been well lately and he seem to think that the chewing gum was the culprit. And after I did the analysis I could see why..."*

*Then the Doctor hands Neal the report.*

*"That was in the letter that I sent to Mr. Gunter. I'm sorry that he's dead. He seem to be a hardworking man. He was always talking about his family. How he missed them and loved them. And that he was doing whatever it took to bring them here. I'm guessing what is on that of piece of paper, is what killed him?" The Doctor replies.*

*"Yes Doctor you guessed right. Are you sure about this?" Neal asks looking shocked as he holds up the paper.*

*"Oh yes most definitely. Whoever thought that idea up is a genius. I mean something as innocuous as chewing gum. But it wasn't meant for human consumption."*

*"No?" Neal asks.*

*"No. Do you have some time Detective I would like to explain it to you?"*

*"Yes Doctor I have all the time in the world."*

### **LATER BACK AT THE MOTEL:**

*Steve was just coming out of the bathroom, wearing his bathrobe, combing his damp hair as Neal came into the room.*

*"Hey look at you!? How do you feel?"*

*"Better. I still feel a little weak."*

*"Here have a seat." Neal pulls a chair out from the table for him then Steve sits down. "Here I got you a bottle of aspirin."*

*"Thanks. Neal what happened to me? I mean I don't think I ever been that sick before."*

*Neal takes off his jacket then he joins him at the table.*

*"Do you remember anything?" Neal ask him.*

*Steve shakes his head. "Na. Just the cold shower and the part where you wouldn't let me go to sleep. I've never been so tired. Did you have any luck?"*

*"Yes I did and this will explain everything. I have the reason Ivan was killed and also the reason why you got sick." Neal replies as he holds up the letter then he hands it to Steve who takes it.*

*Steve looks at Neal for a second then he unfolds the letter. Neal watches as Steve eyes widen then he looks up at Neal with a look of fear on his face.*

*"Is this right?" He asks Neal.*

*"Yes it's right."*

*"But...but Neal this says..."*

*"Yes I know what it says. I've been thinking about it all the way over here."*

*"I could have...."*

*"Yeah but you didn't. I wouldn't have let you."*

*"Jesus." Steve looks up at him. "How did you know...?"*

*"College. I had a roommate. He overdosed. I wrote up and he was dead in the bed next to me. That was the first time I ever saw a dead body. He choked on his own vomit. I couldn't save him but I sure as hell could save you." Neal replies seriously.*

*"Whoever said that higher education is a waste of time...was wrong. After this I may never chew gum again."*

*Neal laughs. "Do you feel good enough to hit the road? I called the guy at the warehouse while I was out, the truck she is ready to go."*

*"Yeah sure I think so." Steve replies as he continues to look at the paper.*

*"Hungry?"*

*"What?" Steve looks up at him.*

*"I said are you hungry?"*

*"Yeah actually I am. I just can't believe it. I mean...." Steve replies.*

*"It's a shock I know. And I'm thinking Ivan found out the same way that you did. Curiosity killed the cat. Somehow he found out what he was hauling and he saw dollar signs. But he wanted proof. Indisputable, no bones about it, proof."*

*"Proof? Why?" Steve replies.*

*Neal takes a deep breath as he scratches his head. "It's just a theory..."*

*"Go ahead..."*

*"He was going to sell it to somebody. That was his windfall. Ava told me that there are people you can hire to get people out of Russia. But they want a lot of money upfront. It's dangerous...."*

*"So he was robbing Peter to pay Paul?" Steve replies.*

*"Bingo."*

*"So that money, the 1,500 he had was what? A retainer?" Steve asks.*

*Neal nods. "That's what I'm thinking. He took that gum to somebody but maybe they wanted proof, so Ivan took that letter back to them and they gave him that money. Maybe he was going to take a little at a time."*

*"So...I'm thinking that the people who gave him the money wouldn't kill him. He was their connection..." Steve replies.*

*"Right."*

*"So...whoever he took it from found out...the source." Steve replies.*

*"Right. That is why Frick and Frack were tailing us."*

*"Ivan had balls didn't he?" Steve asks.*

*"Oh yes." Neal replies as he nods his head. "Ivan, from everything I could find out about him, wasn't stupid. He came from a place that was corrupt. Just to exist you had to play the game so he knew what he was doing. He worked long hours, maybe even two jobs, whatever it took to bring his family over here. He saw this as a chance so he jumped at it..."*

*"Now it's up to us...we have to finish that leap for him."*

*Neal nods his head.*

*"We're spoiled..." Steve replies. "We can have whatever we want here. Go to the corner grocery store and buy a carton of milk or eggs. Go to the store and buy clothes. Do whatever we want. Even if it is illegal. Stand on the frigging street corner holding a sign saying whatever...that the President is a jackass..."*

*"Or that Jesus is coming...repent sinners. Like that guy in front of the Precinct. It's their right."*

*"They will still be here tomorrow." Steve replies.*

*"Yeah. That is what Ivan wanted. Just to be...here."*

*"My mother told me what our family did when they got off that ship at Ellis Island." Steve looks over at Neal.*

*"Which was what?"*

*"Kissed the ground and thanked God." Steve replies.*

*They sit there at that table in that dingy Motel room. Both silent. Thinking.*

*"We need to pack up our shit and get the hell out of Dodge. It's cold outside. Is your hair dry? I don't want you to catch your death. I already saved your ass once. Where's your blow dryer?" Neal replies as he tries to inject some levity into a serious moment. Trying to make them both feel just a little better.*

*Steve smiles as he pulls his hair over his shoulder and he looks at it. "I forgot it."*

*Neal sits up in the chair. "You forgot it? Really?" Then Neal gets up walking with a purpose to the bathroom.*

*This causes Steve to sit up in his chair trying to see into the bathroom. "Ah Neal...old buddy old pal...man that I love. What cha going to do?" Steve asks as he now gets up.*

*Neal comes out of the bathroom carrying a towel. "Sit down."*

*"What's that for?" Steve asks as he does sit down just a little worried as Neal stands in front of him straddling his legs.*

*"What do you think it's for?" Neal asks smiling.*

*Steve laughs as he points. "You know, you can't do that!"*

*"And why not?" Neal asks as he holds the towel between his hands.*

*Steve laughs. "You know why!"*

*"Yes I know but I want to hear you say it. So go ahead Steve....say it."*

*"Because I will..."*

*"Yeah?" Neal replies as he gets closer with the towel.*

*"I will look like a...poodle! I will look like...you!!!" Steve replies as he points at Neal's hair.*

*"That's it!! That's all she...wrote!" Neal replies as he drops the towel down onto Steve's head and he begins to vigorously rub which causes Steve to kick his feet and grab Neal's wrists.*

*"Oh shit!! Neal!! Stop it!!!"*

**TO BE CONTINUED:**