The government has passed two significant acts that eliminate the rights of convicted felons. When Peter Burke learns that Neal Caffrey's Work Contract has been purchased by a private citizen, he springs into action.
Chapter One: Missing

Wednesday, June 23, 10:24AM

Special Agent Peter Burke glanced at the clock on his computer. He had six more minutes. He forced himself to focus on the paperwork in front of him. Mortgage fraud, as usual. He should have picked something more interesting to distract him from the way the seconds seemed to be creeping by this morning.

After reading the same seven lines of an accounting report four times, he pushed the papers aside and stood. He looked through the glass walls of his office to the bullpen of the White Collar Crime Division below. Everything seemed to be running smoothly. Jones was on the phone, taking notes. Diana Berrigan was simultaneously clicking away at her computer and flipping through a fat book filled with photographs – art, it looked like – which looked more interesting than what he was doing. He searched his brain for what case she could be working, and made a note to ask her about it.

He glanced at the clock again. 10:28. With as much discipline as he could manage, Peter sat back in his chair. He closed his eyes, thought about what was left on his task list for the day. He thought about Elizabeth, and decided he needed to plan to take her out to dinner this weekend. They’d been busy lately, and she deserved a good date night. He thought about the Yankee game he was planning to watch that evening, with a beer and his dog by his side.

By the time the reminder alarm was buzzing on his cell phone at 10:30, he already had the receiver of his desk phone in his hand and was punching in a number he knew by heart.

“Good morning, Winters Correctional Camp.” The switchboard operator sounded bored underneath the cheerful façade.

“Morning. This is Special Agent Peter Burke, White Collar Crime Division, FBI,” said Peter. “I’d like to speak with Warden Stone.”

“Warden Stone is currently on medical leave,” said the operator, “Would you like to speak with Interim Warden Jeffries?”

“Medical leave? What happened?” asked Peter.

“I’m sorry, sir. I can’t give out that information.”

“Right. Of course. Can you tell me how long he’s been on leave?”

“Going on six weeks, sir. He should be returning on Monday. Would you like to speak with Interim Warden Jeffries?”

Peter considered. His impatience notwithstanding, this could wait for Stone to return. He could speak with the interim warden, but…it might raise questions. “That’s all right,” said Peter. “This can wait. Thank you.”

Ninety seconds later, Peter was redialing. When the operator answered, he spoke in a rush. “This is Special Agent Peter Burke again,” he said. “On second thought, Warden Stone is likely to be busy
on Monday, and this is a simple matter. I’m just doing a routine inmate check.”

“Certainly, sir. Let me transfer you.”

The line clicked, and there was silence. Peter waited. Usually, when he made this call – every two months exactly – he spoke directly with Stone, because he and Stone were friendly and Stone would give him a little more information. But he could satisfy himself with the basic check this time around, and maybe in a couple of weeks, once Stone had had a chance to re-acclimate, he would do an informal check, off schedule. The line clicked again.

“Inmate Services, Officer Lewis,” snapped an impatient voice.

Peter cleared his throat. “Officer Lewis, this is Special Agent Peter Burke, doing a routine inmate check.”

“Name and Serial Number?”

“Caffrey, Neal. 667609F,” Peter replied. He held his breath. He always held his breath at this point, even after almost four years of a perfect record. Caffrey had been a model inmate. He could hear the clacking of computer keys and the clicking of a mouse.

“Caffrey is no longer with Winters Correctional Camp,” said the officer.

What?

“What?” Peter asked, a spike of unease crawling up his throat. He was supposed to be notified of any change in Caffrey’s status. He wasn’t supposed to be eligible for early release, and if something had happened…

“Caffrey is no longer with Winters—“

“Yeah, okay, I heard you,” said Peter. “Where is he?”

“I can’t divulge that information,” said the Officer. “Have a good—“

“Wait, hold on,” said Peter. “Don’t hang up. What do you mean, he’s no longer with the camp? Do you mean he was transferred? Do you mean he…is he…”

“All I can tell you, sir, is that he is no longer with our facility. Any other inquiries must be made through the proper channels.” Peter clenched his teeth together. The officer was only doing his job. A routine check meant a confirmation that the inmate’s status hadn’t changed and limited information on any infractions committed that could alter his time served. That was fairly common – many agents kept loose tabs on their most memorable inmates. Peter got more information from Stone, who kept an eye on Caffrey for Peter, but that was off the record. Very off the record, since the FBI – and the system – discouraged agents taking too much personal interest in the inmates they had collared. It raised ethical questions.

He rubbed a hand over his forehead. “Okay, yeah. Got it. Can you transfer me to Interim Warden…Jeffries, was it?”

The line clicked. Peter waited. He tapped a pen on the desk. He jiggled his knee. He rolled his shoulders. He tried not to imagine why in hell Caffrey had been moved from Winters with only a few months to go on his four-year sentence.

Finally, a voice came on the line. “Agent Burke? This is Paul Jeffries. What can I do for you?”
Peter relaxed slightly. You never knew what you were going to get from wardens, particularly wardens of large, supermax work camps. Some were assholes. Some, like Stone, were decent men who believed in rehabilitation through structure and discipline. Jeffries sounded reasonable, particularly if he was willing to talk with an unknown agent and offer assistance. If he approached this right, he could get what he wanted without raising any red flags.

“Warden Jeffries,” said Peter. “I am the agent of record for a man who was serving a four-year sentence at Winters. I run a routine check every two months. Because of the circumstances of his arrest and his capacity for escape, his file also has clear instructions that I’m to be notified of any significant changes in status – not day-to-day infractions, but any change to his sentence or his assignment. I just learned from Inmate Services that he is no longer at Winters, and need to find out what happened – and why I wasn’t notified.”

“Who’s the inmate?” asked Jeffries. “I stepped in while Warden Stone is out, so if something slipped through the cracks, it’s because—“

“Totally understandable,” said Peter. The man sounded young, he realized. Peter could throw his weight around and scare the guy, or he could make the guy’s life a little easier. He chose the latter, and softened his tone. “His name’s Caffrey. Neal Caffrey. Serial Number 667609F. If you could tell me what happened – where he is, when he was moved, anything you’ve got – I’d really appreciate it.”

More clacking and clicking. Then a soft “hmmm.”

“Hmm?” asked Peter.

“I see you here on the file, Agent Burke. I apologize that you weren’t notified. That was an oversight, clearly.”

“That’s okay. What can you tell me now?”

“Well – unfortunately, since the transfer has already processed, there’s paperwork involved before I can —“

“Listen, I’ll paper the hell out of it. I’ll do it as soon as we hang up and personally hand-deliver it this afternoon if you want.”

“And as soon as I have that paperwork, I’ll approve it, run it up the chain, and we’ll have the information for you within 72 hours. But —“

Peter re-assessed the situation and changed tactics. “Sure. I’ll also bring along the paperwork on my formal complaint, so you can see where you’re implicated in the ‘oversight.’”

There was silence. Peter gentled his tone again. “Warden Jeffries, you’re in a difficult spot, I get that. But Caffrey is…he’s a special case. He was in the supermax camp at Winters because of these special circumstances. He’s an extreme flight risk, and he has attributes that someone unscrupulous might try to take advantage of. He wasn’t supposed to be transferred. At all. He wasn’t eligible for early release. So I can’t help but be concerned that something like that has clearly happened. Can you just tell me – was he transferred to another facility? Did something else happen? Is he…” Peter couldn’t finish the question. Is he dead? Injured? He swallowed. The thought of something happening to Caffrey – really happening – wasn’t a thought he wanted to entertain.

Jeffries heaved a sigh. “That paperwork better be on my desk before three.”
“I’m filling it out right now,” said Peter.

“Caffrey wasn’t transferred to another facility,” said Jeffries.

Oh, god. Then he… Peter closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

“His Contract was sold.”

Peter’s eyes flew open. “Sold?” he managed. “What the hell do you mean?”

“Six months ago, Congress passed the Economic Stimulus Indenture Act,” explained Jeffries.

Right. Peter knew about that. He didn’t agree with it, but that was something the civil liberties groups were fighting in the courts, and something to think about for the next election. Ever since the passage of the Prison Indenture Act eight years earlier, those convicted of federal felony offenses – and not deemed too dangerous – were sentenced with Work Contracts instead of simple prison sentences. Prisons turned into private factories and work camps, where prisoners were assigned jobs to produce a benefit for society. It was little better than slavery, in Peter’s opinion. But the Economic Stimulus Indenture Act was worse. ESIA said that the federal government could sell Contracts to private citizens. Peter didn’t like it. There were supposedly safeguards and checks in place, but too much could be manipulated, hidden, and paid off. The work camps weren’t great, but they were subject to heavy scrutiny. The government simply could not – and would not – scrutinize a private citizen’s home in the same way. If Caffrey’s Contract had been sold, he could be…who knows where. Not to mention, if he was out of supermax, he’d find a way to escape. And even if he didn’t, ESIA gave private citizens far too much power over inmate punishment for infractions, without sufficient protections in place.

“Caffrey’s contract pre-dated ESIA,” said Peter. “It shouldn’t have been able to be sold.”

“A last-minute rider made ESIA apply retroactively to all Contracts in service,” said Jeffries.
“When I got here, we were just beginning our Contract sales system. It was a little…disorganized at first.”

And with Warden Stone out, no one was paying attention to Caffrey. Which would explain how Caffrey was sold without anyone notifying Peter.

“Okay,” said Peter, after taking a few deep breaths. “When was his Contract sold?”

“Over a month ago,” said Jeffries.

“Jeffries,” said Peter, praying Jeffries was willing to bend the rules a little farther, “I’m going to need to know who bought it.”
Chapter Summary

After Peter learns that Neal's Work Contract has been Sold, he races to determine who the owner is, and what he can learn about him.

Chapter Two: Sold

Wednesday, June 23, 12:45PM

Two hours later, Peter pulled his Taurus up the long, circular drive of a large estate. He took a moment to gather his thoughts and make some decisions.

After hanging up with Jeffries, Peter had tasked Jones with filling out the request for information paperwork, forging his signature, and personally delivering it to Jeffries.

“This takes number one priority, Jones. Drop everything else and get this done, and let me know when it is.” Jones had nodded and immediately gotten to work, no questions asked.

Next, he had pulled Diana into his office. “I’ve got a sensitive situation for you to handle,” he had said. Her sharp eyes flickered with excitement.

“Tell me what you need, boss,” she said.

“I need you to look into a Mr. Carl Friedrich. I don’t know anything about him other than his primary address upstate, and I’m heading up there as soon as this conversation is over. I want to know everything I can about him. His business interests, his personal life – and in particular, anything you can find out about his purchase of Work Contracts since the Economic Stimulus Indenture Act.”

Diana nodded. She was clearly curious, but didn’t ask the questions, sensing his urgency. “I’ll call you with what I find.”

She had, less than an hour after he left. Friedrich was a prince of industry. He had inherited a fortune and a network of manufacturing companies from his father, and had used the political system to create circumstances to his benefit. He had been instrumental in the passage of the Prison Indenture Act, which he had argued would bring jobs back to the United States from overseas by making manufacturing affordable again. This would reduce the price of product, which would give everyone more spending power…etc. etc. etc. Of course, none of that had quite materialized, because prices of manufactured product didn’t actually come down in the wake of PIA. Instead, the owners just got richer.

Of course, Friedrich had also been a player in the lobbying for ESIA, and had publicly purchased several Work Contracts on the very first day ESIA was in force. After that, records were harder to dig up, but Diana had managed to find out that Friedrich had purchased a total of eight Contracts since the passage of ESIA. Beyond that, it was impossible to tell what had happened to the inmates. It was possible they were living in luxury and performing pleasant work. They also could be just about anywhere. Friedrich owned properties in four different states and three other
countries. Inmates weren’t supposed to be allowed out of the country, but Peter had a feeling a man like Friedrich got away with whatever he wanted.

Peter had spent the remainder of his drive testing and discarding strategies for approaching Friedrich. Now, it was time to settle on something, because, according to Diana, Friedrich was home. Or, at least, in town.

When he rang the doorbell, it took a few minutes for someone to open it. An inmate, Peter noticed immediately, from the tight black collar around her neck, with its flashing greed LED light. He hadn’t thought about it, but it made sense that inmates were outfitted with GPS collars upon sale.

The girl looked…okay. She was wearing a dark dress and black rubber-soled shoes, her hair pulled back from her face. She didn’t look malnourished and there were no visible marks on her. Peter relaxed slightly. It’s possible Friedrich just wanted cheap household help.

“Hi,” he said, flashing his badge. “Special Agent Peter Burke, FBI.”

Her eyes darted to his badge and back to his face, then down to the floor. She was practically shaking.

“Hey,” he said softly. “I’m just here to see Mr. Friedrich. Is he available?”

She looked over her shoulder nervously. “He’s out,” she said. “I’m sorry. He should be home soon.”

Peter nodded. “Could I wait? I’ve made a long drive, and this shouldn’t take too long once Mr. Friedrich arrives home.”

She nodded, and opened the door wider so he could enter. “You can wait in the parlor,” she said, gesturing to a set of double doors to his right. “Could I get you something to drink?”

“Water,” he said. “If it’s not too much trouble.”

She nodded, and ran off.

He entered the parlor. It was comfortable enough, with large leather furniture, full bookcases, a small table with a chessboard, and a view of the front lawn. Peter lapped the room a few times, then settled on one of the sofas. He texted Elizabeth that he might be late and that he’d update her later.

After a few minutes, the girl returned with a glass of water on a tray. He took it and murmured thanks. She moved towards the doors, but he stopped her.

“Wait,” he said.

She swiveled, looking at him with wide eyes.

“I have a quick question for you. Have you been working for Mr. Friedrich long?”

She glanced around the room, as if looking for permission to answer.

“I promise this has nothing to do with you,” said Peter gently. “I’m not here for you.”

She relaxed slightly. “Three months,” she said.

“Are there many of you here? Those under Contract,” he clarified.
“A few,” she said.

He set the water down on the coffee table and leaned forward. “Do you know a man named Neal Caffrey? He’s tall – not quite as tall as me – skinny, dark hair, blue eyes.”

She took a step back, and Peter was on high alert. She knew something. He had to proceed carefully.

“It’s okay. You’re not in any trouble, and neither is he.”

Her eyes widened at the last statement.

“Unless…is he in trouble?” Peter held his breath.

The girl swallowed and glanced around again. “He’s not here,” she said.

“But he was here.”

She nodded.

“He’s just not here right now, or he’s not here anymore?”

She licked her lips. “Anymore,” she said. “He…”

“You can tell me,” said Peter. “You won’t get in trouble. I won’t tell Friedrich you said anything. Did he run away?”

She shook her head fiercely, her bangs shaking. “They took him,” she whispered.

“They?”

“They…the government. After he—“

There was the sound of a door opening, and the girl made a little startled sound and darted out of the room.

Peter tried not to let the ball of ice in his stomach keep him from thinking clearly. So far, he knew that Caffrey had been a model prisoner for three years and six months. Then his Work Contract was sold to Friedrich. He was not back at Winters Correctional Camp, so Friedrich hadn’t surrendered his Contract or sold it back for some reason. Jeffries hadn’t had any more information, since Caffrey was no longer in their custody. Finding out where he was would require additional paperwork, and Peter had been hoping to shortcut that by coming to see Friedrich himself.

There were two possibilities. The ESIA provided for open trading, so Friedrich may have sold Caffrey’s Contract to another private citizen, and the transfer was effected by the government so that the proper inspections could be made. But if Caffrey had done something, maybe misbehaved or committed another crime or tried to escape, Friedrich had the power to dictate punishment. He could do it himself or he could request assistance from the government, handing over his Contract for Justice. Under ESIA, owners of Contracts could demand specific forms of Justice.

The door to the parlor opened, and Friedrich walked in, dressed in a three-piece suit and smiling broadly. He looked like a politician. Peter immediately disliked him.

“Agent Burke,” said Friedrich, striding forward and offering his hand. “Welcome. I hope you haven’t been waiting long. If you had called ahead we could have avoided it entirely.”
Peter didn’t miss the subtle scolding in his tone. Friedrich was telling him that Friedrich was a powerful man, whose time was valuable and whose actions should not be questioned, especially by a lowly FBI agent.

“Mr. Friedrich,” said Peter, in his most charming and apologetic voice. “I’m sorry to bother you, especially unannounced. This shouldn’t take a minute.”

“Sit, please,” said Friedrich. “I see Chloe got you some water. Can I offer you something stronger?”

“On the clock,” Peter said, “But thank you.” He settled back on the sofa, and Friedrich sat in one of the armchairs.

“What is this about?” asked Friedrich.

“About a month ago, you purchased a Work Contract for an inmate at Winters Correctional Camp, a Neal Caffrey,” said Peter, watching Friedrich carefully for his reaction. Peter wasn’t disappointed.

“Is there a problem?” asked Friedrich, his eyes snapping. “It was my understanding this was to be handled quickly, and that there were no obstacles.”

Peter paused. If he said the wrong thing here, Friedrich would kick him out, and he would get no information. Friedrich clearly seemed to think Peter knew what was going on with Neal.

“No problem,” said Peter. “Just routine. I’m the agent of record on his case, and was supposed to be notified as to any changes in status. There was an oversight on that,” that much was true, at least, “so I’m a little behind on the paperwork. In order to dot all the ‘i’s’ and cross all the ‘t’s’ I just need to take a quick statement. Five minutes, tops.”

“I gave my statement to the Contract Manager when I surrendered him for Justice,” Friedrich said. Peter hoped that he didn’t pale visibly. So Neal had done something, something that Friedrich felt necessary to surrender the boy to Justice.

“Right, but this is for the FBI files. Different system.” Peter shrugged, the picture of the apologetic bureaucrat. “If I had been notified on time, I would have come out with the Manager and you would have only had to do it once. I’m sorry about the inconvenience. Five minutes, and my boss will get off my back and I’ll be out of your hair.”

Friedrich considered, then nodded. He relaxed and smiled. “Paperwork,” he said. “The bane of all of our existences.”

Peter nodded. He pulled a small pad and pen out of his breast pocket. “If you could just tell me, in your own words, what happened once Caffrey was in your employ, we’ll get this over with.”

“I bought his Contract mid-May,” said Friedrich. “His listed skills were of use to me. For the first three weeks, everything was fine. He was obedient, did his job without complaint. It was a short Contract, since his time would have been served by October, which is why it was appealing. I figured he’d be on his best behavior.”

Peter waited. **What had Neal done?**

“That’s why I was so shocked by what happened. I couldn’t keep his Contract after that; no punishment I could devise would have been acceptable. I mean, I know it’s only a crime of
property, but he couldn’t pay recompense, and there was no guarantee he wouldn’t do it again – or worse – if I filed for an extension of his Contract to cover my loss. I have my grandchildren over frequently. A safety issue, you understand. So I cut my losses and called for Justice to handle it.”

Peter swallowed carefully and paused in his scribbling. “Of course. Totally understandable. I’m sorry for your losses, and I’m sure Caffrey is paying the price.”

He was trying to figure out how to ask Friedrich exactly what kind of a price Caffrey was paying, when Friedrich chuckled. It was a chilling sound.

“I’d think so. I’ve heard that gassing is a particularly difficult death.”
Chapter 3: Mobilized

Chapter Summary

Peter mobilizes his forces.

Chapter Three: Mobilized

Wednesday, June 23, 1:15PM

Peter waited – just barely – until he was back in his car before whipping out his phone. He dialed Diana first.

“Hey boss,” she said.

He pulled out of the drive and into traffic, going as fast as he dared.

“I need you to start preparing a Petition for Forced Sale immediately,” he said.

The pause was brief, but sufficiently conveyed Diana’s surprise. She almost never revealed that she was caught off guard. “Okay. I’m going to need a lot of information for that. I assume the owner of record is Carl Friedrich?”

“You assume correctly. The inmate is Neal Caffrey, Serial Number 667609F. Got that?”

“Got it. Caffrey, huh?” The spark of interest in her voice was unmistakable. “I didn’t know his Contract had been sold.”

“Neither did I, not until this morning,” said Peter. “Listen, this is sensitive. I’m going to call Jones in a minute, and Hughes, but otherwise—“

“Keep it close. Sure thing. What am I filing under?”

Peter considered for a moment. “Do you have it up in front of you? What are my options?” He had taken the mandatory quick course when ESIA had passed, but it had only briefly touched on Forced Sales, and he couldn’t quite remember the possible justifications.

“You’ve got your pick of: (a) Payment of debt or adjudication; (b) Family preservation; (c) Extreme mistreatment; or (d) Other.”

“I supposed ‘Other’ isn’t really a good bet,” said Peter.

“I can look into it. This is all so new, there might not have been many of these arbitrated yet…”

“Look into it, but for now put it under ‘Extreme mistreatment.’”

There was another pause. “Boss,” said Diana, “what did they do to Caffrey?”

“Hopefully nothing yet,” he said. “Or else this whole thing is a moot point.”
Peter had been wary of pressing Friedrich for more information. As soon as he figured out that Friedrich had selected death as his Justice, he had come up with the strategy of a Forced Sale. Under ESIA, a private citizen could petition the government to make another private citizen sell a Work Contract for fair value. Friedrich was definitely concerned about his property losses, both for whatever Caffrey had done and for what he had paid for Caffrey’s Contract. If Peter could provide compensation for those losses, Friedrich was likely to agree to the sale without too much trouble. Peter wasn’t sure where he was going to come up with the cash, but he knew one thing for certain.

He wasn’t going to let anyone kill the kid.

Caffrey deserved his sentence, sure. He probably deserved more than four years, but they had only been able to prove the one case of bond forgery, so four years was appropriate. And of all the things Caffrey had probably done, none of them warranted a death sentence.

“I’m going to need details for the Extreme Mistreatment,” said Diana.

“I know. I’m on my way back. For now, document the original conviction, its non-violent nature, his model behavior at Winters Correctional Camp; you can find records of all of that in my office. Call Warden Jeffries – use my name – if you need more information or something official from the camp to show he never committed a single infraction while there. And find out everything you can about likely success of this. Especially look for cases in which the inmate had been surrendered for Justice. Look for overlap with ‘cruel and unusual punishment.’” Peter knew the “cruel and unusual punishment” angle was a reach…the Supreme Court had basically rubber stamped treatment of inmates as property rather than people with the passage of PIA.

“Boss…” she sounded anxious. She was reading between the lines, as usual.

“Yeah. It’s urgent. I’ll be back in a couple of hours, Diana. Do your best and call me with whatever questions you come up with.”

His next call was to Jones. “Peter, what’s going on?” he asked, his voice low and concerned.

“I don’t have time to explain. Can you prepare a Stay of Execution? Call Margaret Beechwood at the U.S. Attorney’s office, and see if she can talk you through it. Use my name, I’m calling in a favor. Tell her we’re preparing a Petition for Forced Sale but need time to put it together and arbitrate.”

Jones didn’t hesitate. “Will do. Who—“

“Talk to Diana. She’ll fill you in on what she knows. I’ll be back before three-thirty and I want this ready to go.”

He took a few deep breaths before he called Hughes.

“Peter. What’s up?” asked his boss.

“We’ve got a situation, Reese.” Peter paused, considering how to explain. He needed Hughes’ support, and any favors he was holding from anyone in power, and he needed it fast.

“Well? Spit it out, Burke.”

Right. Direct was always the best approach with Hughes.

“It’s Caffrey.”
“Did he escape the supermax? I can pull you a team.”

“No. Actually, it’s more serious than that. Winters sold his Work Contract under ESIA.”

A pause. “Okay,” said Hughes. He sounded as if he didn’t understand why he should care.

“Something happened. I don’t know what, but apparently it involved a substantial loss of property to the owner.”

“Why am I not surprised?” Hughes asked dryly. “Whoever thought selling that kid’s Contract to a private citizen was a good idea? Of course he stole something.”

“Whatever it was – and remember, I don’t know the details yet – the owner surrendered him for Justice. He chose…Reese, he chose death.”

“Seriously?” Peter could tell that now he had Hughes’ full attention. “For stealing something?”

“I don’t know what he did,” said Peter. “The guy just mentioned his ‘losses’ a bunch of times. He also said something about it being a safety issue.”

“Caffrey’s not violent,” said Hughes.

“No. He’s not,” said Peter.

“Maybe prison changed him.”

Peter was getting frustrated. “Doubtful. He’s a model inmate up until the sale, and then he does something so terrible he’s going to be put to death for it? With only a few months left on his sentence? No.”

“Okay. I get it. We don’t want Caffrey killed. You know how I feel about ESIA, particularly the Justice parts of it. I’m on board. What do you need from me?”

“I need to know where he’s being held, when his execution is scheduled, and what the hell he did. I need to know what the owner’s losses are. I can file an Inmate Information Request, but it’ll take —”

“Too long,” said Hughes. “I can throw my weight around, push that through. Burke, are we sure…”

“No,” said Peter. “No, I’m not sure of anything. It might have already happened. It sounded like he was surrendered a few weeks ago.”

“Let me make a few calls. I’ll update you as soon as I know something.” Hughes’ tone was grim.

“Diana has more details, if you need them,” said Peter. “Reese, thank you.”

Peter threw his phone down on the passenger seat and rubbed his free hand over his face. One step at a time, he reminded himself. That’s all you can do.

He made one more call.

“Hey, hon,” he said, when Elizabeth answered.
“What’s wrong?” she asked immediately. His wife knew him well, that was for sure.

“Remember Neal Caffrey?”

“Remember the man who stole you away from me for three years of our marriage, and who still sends me birthday gifts? I think it rings a bell.”

“He’s in trouble,” said Peter.

He briefly explained the circumstances. Elizabeth was quiet for a moment.

“You still there?” he asked.

“What can we do?”

This. This was why he loved Elizabeth. One of the many many reasons, at least. She knew Peter couldn’t let this happen to Neal, and was willing to jump into the fray with him.

“Well…I’ve got Hughes, Jones, and Diana working on something. A Stay of Execution so that we can file a Petition for Forced Sale.”

“I didn’t know the government could pursue a Forced Sale,” she said.

“It can’t.”

“Then…oh.” Elizabeth sighed. “I hadn’t thought we were going to be in the business of purchasing Work Contracts.”

“We’re not,” he said. “This is an extreme circumstance, and probably temporary, just to get him out of Justice. At most, it would last until October, when his sentence is up.”

“How much?” she asked.

“I don’t know yet. What do we have available?”

“We’ve got…well, there’s the stock account. Your pension, which we can borrow against. The house. Some savings. My sister might be…”

“Okay, this is what you can do. Figure out how much we can come up with and how much time we need to do it. I have no idea how much the fair value would be, but I’ve got people on it.”

“I’ll call you in a bit,” she said.

“El, you’re amazing. Have I told you that today?”

He could almost hear her smiling. “You can never tell me that enough,” she said. “Keep me posted.”

He spent the rest of the drive back to the city trying not to think about the very real possibility that they were doing all this work for nothing, and that it was already too late.
Chapter Four: Found

Wednesday, June 23, 3:30 PM

When Peter entered the White Collar bullpen, Hughes stuck his head out of his office.

“Burke. Get in here,” he said. He was frowning.

Frowning, not regretful. Peter chose to take that as a good sign. He shot Diana and Jones a glance as he swept by their desks. They both gave him thumbs up. More good signs. He mounted the stairs and slid into Hughes’ office.

“What did you find out?” he asked, a little breathless.

“Sit,” said Hughes. “First of all, he’s still alive.”

Peter let out his breath with an audible whoosh. The relief he felt made him almost boneless as his muscles unclenched. He had been doing his best to ignore the likelihood of the worst possible scenario, but his body hadn’t been fooled.

“That’s good news,” said Peter.

“That’s the only good news,” replied Hughes. “Caffrey didn’t steal something. He murdered another inmate in Friedrich’s employ.”

“He – what?”

Peter’s mind couldn’t wrap itself around the idea. Neal Caffrey was not violent, he was sure of it. This was the man who had gone quietly and with a smile when he was finally arrested, the man who never carried a gun because he didn’t want anyone to get hurt. The man who had accepted his defeat with grace and didn’t seem to hold it against Peter or anyone else.

“Apparently, Caffrey was found standing over the inmate’s body, blood all over him. The guy was stabbed to death with a kitchen knife.”

“It must have been self defense,” said Peter. “Was there any evidence that he actually did it at all? Maybe he found the body.”

Hughes shrugged. “No way to know,” he said. “Inmates are property, not people. They have no rights. This isn’t like someone on the street who is found over a dead body and has a right to due process.”
“What did Caffrey say about it?”

“Peter, there’s no record of any of that. All there is, is a statement from Friedrich supporting his decision to surrender and his selection of Justice. Inmates aren’t interrogated. No evidence is gathered. No case is made.”

Peter ran a hand through his hair. “But someone was murdered. Surely there’s an investigation.”

Hughes pursed his lips. “The inmate who was murdered is also considered property, not a person. Investigations aren’t mandatory, any more than if Caffrey had stolen food. Owners have sole discretion on how to handle offenses to their property. Law enforcement only gets involved if a civilian is injured.”

Peter blew out a breath. This was complicated, and he hated the law even more now than he had this morning. None of it was right. But still, there was a bright side: since the murder was considered a property offense, he should be able to force a sale with compensation. He realized that now he was going to be offering compensation for not one but two Work Contracts. He wasn’t entirely sure he’d be able to come up with the money for that. He’d have to call Elizabeth again.

“Peter, are you seriously planning to buy Caffrey’s Contract?” Hughes looked at him searchingly. “That’s…extreme.”

“Can you think of any other way to prevent his execution?” asked Peter. “I’m all ears. But this is all I can come up with. Friedrich has the right, under the law, to select death as his Justice. As far as I can tell, the only way around that is for someone else to take over as owner of record.”

Hughes stared over Peter’s shoulder for a long minute. Finally, he sighed. “I can’t think of another way. This is complicated, though. I’m not sure how it will read to have the agent who caught Caffrey buy his Work Contract. There’s something worrisome about that, ethically.”

“More worrisome than ESIA?”

“Point. Okay, proceed. Let me know if you need anything else from me.”

“One thing,” said Peter. “Where is he being held, and can you get me in?”
Chapter Summary

Peter finally sees where Neal is being held.

Chapter Five: Held

Thursday, June 24, 8:00AM

Peter stared out at the Prince Correctional Camp and Justice Facility with more than a little trepidation. It looked a lot like Winters, with the barbed wire, and the large factory buildings. But there was another building, square and stone and cold, off to the east. That was the Justice Facility, where inmates were held and Justice was administered.

“Justice.” Right. I can think of another name for it…

Sometimes Peter wondered about the world he was living in. When he was young, it had seemed so simple, so clear. Black and white. He was in favor of justice and laws. He believed in order of society. So he joined the FBI. He investigated crimes. He brought criminals to justice.

And then PIA passed, and he began to wonder if he liked the results of his actions. Sure, criminals, those who broke the law, needed to pay their debts to society. He guessed he could sort of see the logic in having those literally be “debts” that needed to be worked off, but it was an uncomfortable gray area. Still, he put his head down and kept working, trusting the system.

With ESIA, things were different. He needed to have a long think about all of this, and what it meant for his future. But for now, he had something more urgent and more important to worry about.

The previous afternoon, after his conversation with Hughes, he had considered coming straight out to the Justice Facility. He had a need to see Caffrey for himself, make sure the kid really was still breathing. He wanted to tell Caffrey what he and the others were doing, what they were working on. Give him some hope.

Instead, he had done the smart thing. The execution had been scheduled for Monday, which meant they had time – a little time – to get this right. AUSA Margaret Beechwood had not only helped Jones put together the Stay of Execution, but also, once she had spoken with Peter and realized the nature of the circumstances, taken it before a judge herself.

Beechwood was anti-ESIA, and she knew which judges were likely to be sympathetic. Thanks to her inside knowledge, the Stay was ordered quickly, for the mandatory two-week maximum. The judge had also gone above and beyond, and had pre-ordered two additional extensions on the same facts, as long as the parties filed a Petition for Forced Sale by Friday close of business, and as long as the Forced Sale was still in negotiation when the extensions were needed.

Next step was the Petition for Forced Sale. Based on Diana’s research, their best bet was “extreme mistreatment,” but it was an uphill battle. Beechwood had agreed to help them with that as well.
Margaret, this means a lot to me,” Peter had said, when she returned to the White Collar offices with the news of the successful Stay. “I know I was calling in a favor, but the scales have tipped. I now owe you. Big.”

She had shrugged. “It’s kind of my job anyway,” she said. “Not exactly, since I’m supposed to be putting criminals away, not getting them out…but I went into this business because I believed in justice. That doesn’t always mean punishment.”

She had clasped his hands in hers, then took the judge’s Order on the Stay of Execution so it could be served on the Justice Facility.

Peter had a second copy of the order in his briefcase. He planned to hand-deliver it to the Justice Facility himself. He wanted to make absolutely certain there was no “oversight” on this matter.

His visit here had several purposes, then. First, he needed to deliver the Stay of Execution and speak with anyone who would listen to make sure they knew about it. Second, he wanted to see Caffrey, make sure he was okay for the time being. Third, he needed to gather information to beef up their “extreme mistreatment” claim.

Peter presented his badge at the gate, and then checked in with prison security. He surrendered his firearm, backup, and the knife he carried in an ankle holster. He got directions from the guard, and set out across the grounds to the Justice Facility.

Once there, he went through security again. They made him turn in his phone here. When he asked, the surly guard just said, “regulations.” Peter didn’t put up a fight, though he had been hoping to take photos of Caffrey for their Petition.

An officer led Peter down a short hallway to the Facility Director’s office. A plaque by the door announced his name as “Henry Green.” Peter knocked.

“Come in,” said a gruff voice.

Peter opened the door and stepped inside the tiny office. The small window looked out at a grey cinderblock wall. The furniture was scuffed, metal, and rusty. The walls were bare, except for a calendar depicting sleepy scenes of nature. Days that had passed were marked with a big black “x.”

The man sitting behind the desk looked as scuffed as the furniture, as bland as the decoration. But he smiled, the left side of his face having more success than the right – some sort of muscle disease, Peter guessed – and heaved himself to his feet.

“Agent Burke,” said Green, holding out his hand. Peter blinked in surprised; he hadn’t realized the Director knew he was coming. “Margaret Beechwood was in here yesterday afternoon,” the man said in explanation. “Said you’d be swinging by today.”

So Beechwood had delivered the Stay of Execution herself. Interesting. Peter smiled in return.

“Good to meet you,” he said. “I wanted to introduce myself and make sure you’d seen the Stay of Execution on inmate Neal Caffrey.”

Green tapped a fat finger on a paper on his desk, and Peter realized it was the copy of the Stay Beechwood had delivered. He relaxed slightly.

“Glad to see you’re on top of it,” he said. “An oversight at Winters Correctional Camp led to this situation in the first place, so I wanted to make absolutely sure nothing slipped through the cracks.”
“A life is at stake,” said Green. “Maybe an inmate’s life, but a life nonetheless. I assure you I have no intention of letting that slip through the cracks.”

He motioned for Peter to come around to his side of the desk, and clacked at his computer for a moment. Then he pointed to the screen.

Peter scanned the information. There it was, in black and white:

Neal Caffrey, Serial Number 667609F.

Owner of Record: Carl Friedrich

Offense: Destruction of Property – Murder of Inmate

Execution date: 7/12 (2 automatic extensions remain)

Selected Method: Gas

He tried to mask the shiver that ran down his spine, but he saw what Green had wanted him to see: the execution date had already been changed.

“Thank you,” said Peter. “Can I ask you another favor?”

“You can ask,” said Green. “I may or may not be able to help.”

“Could you keep an eye on him? Let me know if anything weird happens or if anything changes?”

Green hesitated a moment, then nodded. “I can do that. You want to see him?”

“I do.”

Green called the officer back in, shook Peter’s hand, and wished him luck.

Now the officer led Peter down another hallway to an elevator. The officer was silent, solemn. Peter took his cues from the man and remained silent himself. It allowed him to focus on his task ahead: assess Caffrey’s state, gather information. Whether he was going to tell Caffrey what he was working on or not…he hadn’t decided. Would it be cruel to give him hope if they weren’t successful? This wasn’t a sure thing, by any means.

Once off the elevator, the officer took Peter through two sets of locked doors, and into a corridor lined with blank metal doors. The doors each had a small window, with a shutter. The shutters were all closed.

They stopped in front of one of the doors. A plastic bracket held a clipboard, which had Caffrey’s information on it. Peter noted with satisfaction that his execution date had been crossed out and changed already. It seemed Green was running a tight ship, and it made him feel more confident.

“Take this,” said the officer, holding out a small black device.

“A taser?” asked Peter. “I’m not going to tase him.”

“Regulations,” said the officer. “For your protection. These guys can get desperate.”

“Aren’t you worried he could get a hold of it and tase me?”

“He’s restrained,” said the officer.
Peter rolled his eyes. “Then…never mind, give it to me.” He accepted the weapon. They take his gun and knife but then give him a taser. Sure, this makes sense.

The officer unlocked the door with a key and a key card. He pulled it open.

“Bang on the door when you want to come out,” he said. “I’ll be right here.”

Peter entered the room and stopped short just inside the doorway. It smelled like…Peter didn’t want to think about what all of those smells were, but none were pleasant. His eyes swept the eight by eight foot windowless interior, the single buzzing fluorescent light, and…

Caffrey.

He was lying on his back on a mattress, which sat flush on the floor. No bed frame. His eyes were closed, and he had his hands folded up toward his chest like he was praying. He didn’t move.

Peter took a step closer. The kid was restrained, all right. There were thick manacles on his ankles and just above his knees, with an extremely short chain linking them, so that Caffrey would be able to barely shuffle forward by inches. But his hands…

His hands and forearms, to just over his elbows, were encased in solid metal. His palms were facing each other, forced together – that was the illusion of prayer – and the elbow restraints forced his elbows to stay bent. Caffrey wouldn’t be able to even straighten his arms, let alone separate his hands or use his fingers in any way.

No one was taking any chances that he’d somehow find a way to escape.

Peter took another step closer. On top of that, the kid was completely naked. Peter was startled that he hadn’t noticed that first, but he had been struck by the restraints. He looked awful, skin an alarming gray color, hair and beard disheveled, hollow spaces where there should have been muscle. He seemed to be shaking, or shivering, slightly. Peter guessed he was cold. There were no blankets that he could see, and the room was chilled.

He swallowed. Caffrey was in rough shape. The urge to take him away from here, to help him in some way, was overwhelming, and nearly brought Peter to his knees. Somehow, he remained upright, and cleared his throat.

“Is it time?” asked Neal, his voice raw and hoarse from lack of use.

“Caffrey,” said Peter.

Neal’s eyes flew open, and for a brief second, he smiled, a flicker of pleasure lighting up his blue eyes. It fled as quickly as it had come. A new smile took its place, one that was full of sarcasm and the promise of dry wit.

Caffrey levered himself – with difficulty – to a sitting position, swinging his restrained legs around to stretch out in front of him, off the mattress. He lowered his bent arms as much as possible to provide some cover for himself.

“Peter,” he said. “Come to say goodbye? I didn’t know you cared.”

Peter found himself at a loss for words. He cleared his throat, stalling. What could he even say? Where could he begin?

Finally, he said perhaps the dumbest thing possible.
“How are you holding up?”

Neal let out a short, bitter laugh. “Great. Can’t you tell? I’ve never been better.”

A shudder wracked his narrow frame, and Peter suddenly knew at least something he could do. He shrugged out of his jacket and crossed the small space, draping it around Neal’s shoulders. While Neal looked startled at first, he heaved a huge, involuntary sigh the moment the material, slightly warmed from Peter’s body, enveloped him. He visibly relaxed.

“Thanks,” he said. “You don’t have to… I’m a mess and you’ll have to have this cleaned.”

Peter shrugged. “Big deal.”

“Peter, why are you here? I mean, not that I’m not glad to see you – I haven’t really seen anyone in forever, so I’d be glad to see anyone – but why are you here?”

Peter’s heart broke at the question. Caffrey couldn’t imagine that someone would come looking for him, or check up on him, or want to… ease his suffering in some way.

“A few reasons,” he said. “First, I want you to know that I just found out yesterday that you were here. I didn’t know you had left the supermax until yesterday morning.”

“Yeah, one of my more brilliant moves, it seems,” said Neal, with a small smirk.

“Wait a second… you wanted your Contract to be sold?” asked Peter.

Neal shrugged. “I wanted to get out of the work camp. I wanted to be out in the world again. It seemed a good deal.”

Peter shook his head. “It’s dangerous,” he said. “You had no idea what you were getting yourself into.”

“Apparently.” Neal laughed softly. “I actually thought I’d have a better chance of escaping from a private citizen than a supermax. That GPS collar, though… they’re not messing around with that.”

Peter rubbed a hand over his forehead. “Neal, you had four months left of your sentence. You were trying to escape?”

“Not exactly. I wanted to look for someone. I thought I would have more… resources… to do that in a private household.”

Peter considered that a moment, and then realization dawned. “You thought you’d be able to con your new owner into allowing you some leeway.”

Neal gifted Peter with one of his most brilliant smiles. “It’s always worked out pretty well in the past.”

“So you, what? Offered yourself up?”

Neal nodded. “They asked for volunteers, and I volunteered.”

Well, that explained why Neal’s Contract had been put up for sale so quickly. And why it didn’t raise any flags with Warden Stone gone. He had agreed to it.

“Okay,” said Peter. “Well, that answers one of my questions. Regardless, I should have been notified, but there was an oversight, and I didn’t know. If I had known, I would have been here
“I appreciate that, I really do,” said Neal.

“Neal, what happened with Friedrich?” Peter hadn’t intended to ask. He figured they’d have plenty of time for that, but since he was here, he felt like he needed to know.

Neal looked surprised at the question. “What do you mean?” he asked, casting his eyes downward. It was hard to tell, but Peter thought he might be blushing.

“What happened with the other inmate?” Peter clarified.

Neal raised his eyes again, his expression turned desperate. “Peter, I swear to you – I swear – I didn’t kill that guy.”

Peter searched his face, and all he saw there was honesty. He nodded. “I believe you.”

Neal relaxed visibly. “Good. I wouldn’t want you to think I could ever – it wasn’t even something like self-defense. I didn’t do it.”

“What did happen?”

Neal shook his head. “It doesn’t matter. The law doesn’t care what I have to say. Can I ask you a question?” Neal’s eyes dropped to the floor, and there was a hesitation in his voice, as though he didn’t really want to ask it but needed to.

“Shoot,” said Peter.

“How long…just, how long?”

“It’s June 24th,” said Peter. “I think you’ve been here a couple of weeks.”

“June 24th,” murmured Neal. “Seventeen days.”

“You didn’t know?”

“It’s impossible to tell,” he said. “There’s no way to count.”

“You can’t count the nights?”

“No nights in here,” said Neal. He pointed his chin up at the fluorescent. “That stays on all the time. No windows. No way to tell how much time is passing except for meals, and they aren’t regular.”

Peter looked around the cell again. Neal had been held here for over two weeks, with no way of marking time and no way of moving around. He did certainly have some ammunition for “extreme mistreatment,” but if this were how they treated all prisoners awaiting execution, it might not get them very far.

“What’s up with the restraints?” asked Peter. “It’s not like you can escape.”

“I’m a flight risk, or so my file says,” said Neal. “No bed frame, no clothing, no bedding, so I can’t devise a plan or kill myself before they do.”

Peter shook his head. “I’m sorry, Neal,” he said.
Neal smiled. “Not your fault.”

It kind of was, though, Peter thought. “I’m the one who caught you in the first place.”

“And I’m the one who put myself in a position to be chased. It’s not your fault.” He looked up at Peter then, and Peter saw that his sentiment was genuine. “I should thank you for a fun few years. I enjoyed being chased by you.”

Peter smiled back. “And I enjoyed chasing you.”

They shared the moment, and then Neal took a deep breath. “Do me a favor and tell Elizabeth happy birthday for me? Her birthday is next week, right? Apologize for me, since I won’t be able to send a card this year.”

Peter laughed. “Yeah. Next Wednesday. I’ll tell her. She’ll miss the card.”

“Do you know...” Neal’s voice trailed off, and then he swallowed and tried again. “When I asked before, about how long, what I actually meant was: how long do I have? Do you know when it’s supposed to happen?”

Peter made his decision then. Neal needed to know someone was fighting for him, even if it didn’t work out.

“Your execution was scheduled for next Monday,” he said.

“Okay. Four days. Okay.”

“But we got a Stay ordered yesterday. Two weeks, and then two more two-week extensions available.”

Neal’s head jerked up. “What? Why?” He glanced around the cell, his eyes wild. Peter could almost see him thinking, *two more weeks of this?*

“Because we’re working on getting you out of here. It’s not…it’s not a sure thing. It’s actually kind of a long shot.”

There it was. Peter could see it in Neal’s face, a flicker of hope.

“What’s the long shot?” he asked.

“I’m trying to force a sale of your Contract. To me.”

Neal’s jaw dropped. Then his eyes fluttered shut, and he fell to the side, landing half on and half off the mattress, out cold.
Rewind to Neal's perspective. I know it's a bit of a cheat, but I felt like this particular scene deserved to be told from both sides. I won't do that -- much -- in the future.

Chapter Six: Held, Redux

Thursday, June 24, 8:40AM

When Neal heard the cell door open, and someone enter, he didn’t open his eyes. It wasn’t a meal; too soon after his last one. All he could think was that it was finally time. He waited as long as he could for his visitor to say something, but when nothing happened, he couldn’t take it any more.

“Is it time?” he made himself ask. He steeled himself for the affirmative response.

Instead, he heard something he never thought he would: Peter Burke’s voice.

He had dreamed about hearing Peter’s voice again. All through his imprisonment, he had hoped that Peter would come and visit him. It was why he drew illustrations, made cards, sent gifts with his meager prison funds. He was hoping that the agent who had chased him for three years would care, just a little, about how he was doing.

It had never happened. He was disappointed, but not completely surprised. It was a blow to the ego, more than anything, he had convinced himself. He had thought he was among the best, matching wits and guts with the smartest law enforcement agent he had ever encountered. But to Peter Burke, he was just another collar. Nothing special.

For a second after Peter spoke, Neal thought he was hallucinating, that maybe he had already died, or there was some other explanation that wasn’t reality.

But when he opened his eyes, there stood Peter, in all his glory…and in the same damned off-the-rack suit he had been wearing the day he had finally caught Neal. He couldn’t help the grin that spread across his face.

His next thought was, oh god, I’m completely naked.

In what he hoped was a casual move, he maneuvered himself into a sitting position, his muscles screaming and his skin under the restraints burning from where it had been rubbed raw. But he pasted a smile on and tried to cover himself.

“Peter,” he said. “Come to say goodbye? I didn’t know you cared.”

Peter just stared at him. Neal tried not to let it show, but god, he was ashamed. He had tried to maintain his dignity around this man. Even the day he was caught, no matter how scared shitless he was underneath, no matter how hard he was thinking about how royally fucked he was, he tried to accept his fate with grace, even offering to shake Peter’s hand. Now, there was nothing he could
do. He was naked, dirty, and completely helpless. At his lowest point.

Then Peter asked him a completely stupid, *completely Peter Burke*, question.

“How are you holding up?”

Neal tried to laugh, but it came out bitter. “Great. Can’t you tell? I’ve never been better.”

Then, to his dismay, he shivered hard. It was so damned cold in the cell, and he had no way of getting warm. He couldn’t even really move to get his heart going, warm up that way. Now, with the cool air on his back, he couldn’t help the vicious shaking.

Suddenly, to his shock, Peter was removing his suit jacket, crossing the cell, draping it around Neal’s shoulders. He was about to protest, but then…the jacket was warm from Peter’s body, and it just felt better than anything had felt in a long time. He nearly moaned, but managed to sigh instead.

“Thanks,” he said. God, he was sure he smelled awful. Peter was never going to be able to get the stink out of this jacket. “You don’t have to…I’m a mess and you’ll have to have this cleaned.”

Peter shrugged. “Big deal.”

He had to ask the question. He was glad to see Peter, but suspected that Peter had come to pay last respects. Which, really, confirmed every good thing Neal had ever thought about the agent. Even if Neal wasn’t anything special to him, Peter would take time out of his life to wish him well. He needed to hear it, really. Hear that this was the end, and there was nothing he could do to prevent it. He would believe it, and respect it, from Peter.

“Peter, why are you here? I mean, not that I’m not glad to see you – I haven’t really seen anyone in forever, so I’d be glad to see anyone – but why are you here?”

The agent paused, seeming to consider his options. “A few reasons,” Peter said. “First, I want you to know that I just found out yesterday that you were here. I didn’t know you had left the supermax until yesterday morning.”

“Yeah, one of my more brilliant moves, it seems,” said Neal. *I’m such an idiot, and have zero impulse control. Go ahead and say it, we both know it’s true.*

“Wait a second…you wanted your Contract to be sold?” asked Peter.

Neal shrugged. What to say here? How much should he tell Peter? He settled on something that was mostly true. “I wanted to get out of the work camp. I wanted to be out in the world again. It seemed a good deal.”

Peter shook his head. “It’s dangerous,” he said. “You had no idea what you were getting yourself into.”

“Apparently.” Neal laughed softly. Then, without really meaning to, he kept talking. He didn’t feel like he totally had control of his head. “I actually thought I’d have a better chance of escaping from a private citizen than a supermax. That GPS collar, though…they’re not messing around with that.”

Peter rubbed a hand over his forehead. “Neal, you had four months left of your sentence. You were trying to escape?”

Neal decided to be mostly honest. It wasn’t like his situation was likely to get worse. He wouldn’t
mention Kate by name; there was no point in bringing her into this.

“Not exactly. I wanted to look for someone. I thought I would have more…resources…to do that in a private household.”

Peter considered that a moment, and then realization dawned. “You thought you’d be able to con your new owner into allowing you some leeway.”

“It’s always worked out pretty well in the past,” Neal said, grinning up at Peter.

“So you, what? Offered yourself up?”

Neal nodded. “They asked for volunteers, and I volunteered.”

“Okay,” said Peter. “Well, that answers one of my questions. Regardless, I should have been notified, but there was an oversight, and I didn’t know. If I had known, I would have been here sooner.”

Neal could hear the sincerity, and the regret, in Peter’s voice. Something warm bloomed inside of him, that did more to calm his shivering than Peter’s jacket. He believed it, that the agent would have tried to prevent this if he could have, or that he would have stepped in and prevented the sale, or at least come to visit sooner. It was…surprising, but made him feel less anxious, somehow.

“I appreciate that, I really do,” said Neal.

“Neal, what happened with Friedrich?”

Neal froze. He wasn’t going to talk about Friedrich with Peter. There was absolutely no point, and there was no way he was going to leave Peter with an impression of him that…that Neal himself couldn’t really grapple with.

“What do you mean?” he asked, stalling. He could feel heat on his cheeks, and tried to stamp down his embarrassment.

“What happened with the other inmate?” Peter clarified.

Oh. That was all Peter was asking about. Suddenly, it was vitally important that Peter know that Neal hadn’t murdered anyone. He looked directly at Peter, willing all façade to drop away. No manipulation, just the truth. “Peter, I swear to you – I swear – I didn’t kill that guy.”

After a moment, Peter nodded. “I believe you.”

Neal let out a breath, hunching down into Peter’s jacket, tension evaporating from his shoulders. “Good. I wouldn’t want you to think I could ever – it wasn’t even something like self-defense. I didn’t do it.”

“What did happen?”

There was no point in going there. It was a can of worms that it wouldn’t do any good to open. He just shook his head.

“It doesn’t matter. The law doesn’t care what I have to say.” The truth of that settled over him like a noose. A noose that was more than metaphorical. He wondered how it would happen, and when. No one had told him anything other than Your owner has selected the death penalty. Maybe Peter knew. He had to ask. “Can I ask you a question?”
“Shoot,” said Peter.

“How long…just, how long?”

“It’s June 24th,” said Peter. “I think you’ve been here a couple of weeks.”

That wasn’t exactly what Neal was asking, but it was shocking information.

“June 24th,” he whispered. He calculated quickly. “Seventeen days.”

“You didn’t know?”

“It’s impossible to tell,” he said. “There’s no way to count.”

“You can’t count the nights?”

“No nights in here,” said Neal. He pointed his chin up at the fluorescent. “That stays on all the time. No windows. No way to tell how much time is passing except for meals, and they aren’t regular.” He closed his eyes, struggling to maintain control and not completely lose it. It was a nightmare, not knowing how the time was passing. He had never before appreciated the way night fell, marking days. He had never thought about how important it was to be able to exist in the dark, where you could retreat into yourself, not be seen. With the light on all the time, there was no way to escape, even mentally.

When Neal opened his eyes again, Peter was gazing around the small cell, his lips pursed and a dark look in his eyes. He almost looked angry.

“What’s up with the restraints?” asked Peter, finally. “It’s not like you can escape.”

“I’m a flight risk, or so my file says,” said Neal. “No bed frame, no clothing, no bedding, so I can’t devise a plan or kill myself before they do.”

Peter shook his head. “I’m sorry, Neal,” he said.

Neal smiled. Of course Peter would apologize. “Not your fault.”

“I’m the one who caught you in the first place,” said Peter.

He wasn’t about to let Peter blame himself for what was happened. For god’s sake, Peter hadn’t been the one to forge bonds and art and commit major theft. “And I’m the one who put myself in a position to be chased. It’s not your fault. I should thank you for a fun few years. I enjoyed being chased by you.”

Peter smiled back. “And I enjoyed chasing you.”

It was time for Peter to go, nearly. Neal could feel it. He took a deep breath, so he could properly say goodbye. “Do me a favor and tell Elizabeth happy birthday for me? Her birthday is next week, right? Apologize for me, since I won’t be able to send a card this year.”

Peter laughed. “Yeah. Next Wednesday. I’ll tell her. She’ll miss the card.”

“Do you know…” Peter hadn’t answered the right question before, and his best chance at getting the information was right now. He could ask. He had to ask. “When I asked before, about how long, what I actually meant was: how long do I have? Do you know when it’s supposed to happen?”
Peter looked like he was deciding whether to tell him or not. *Come on, Peter, I can handle it.*

“Your execution was scheduled for next Monday,” he said.

“Okay. Four days. Okay.” Neal breathed in and out, grappling for control. He wasn’t going to hyperventilate. At least this, *this*, would be over in four days.

“But we got a Stay ordered yesterday. Two weeks, and then two more two-week extensions available.”

Neal’s head jerked up. “What? Why?” God help him, his first thought was to protest. He couldn’t prolong this, he’d rather get it over with. He was completely, utterly helpless. More time wouldn’t mean a chance to escape, it would only mean more misery. But then Peter kept talking, and everything shifted.

“Because we’re working on getting you out of here. It’s not…it’s not a sure thing. It’s actually kind of a long shot.”

Neal held his breath. Getting him *out?* As in, no death penalty, no more being stuck in this hell? There was a catch. There had to be. Even *he* couldn’t be this lucky.

“What’s the long shot?” he asked carefully.

“I’m trying to force a sale of your Contract. To me.”

Neal’s jaw dropped. Apparently he *could* be that lucky. Either that, or he had been right in the first place, and he was dreaming, hallucinating, or already dead.

The edges of his vision when fuzzy and grey, and then everything went black.
Chapter Summary

Peter revives Neal, and they devise a plan.

Chapter Seven: Revived

Thursday, June 24, 9:10AM

Peter launched himself across the cell as soon as Caffrey crumpled. He didn’t make it in time to catch him, but at least his head had landed on the mattress, and not the floor.

“Neal,” he said, gripping the man’s shoulder and shaking gently. “Neal, come on, wake up.”

Neal didn’t stir. Peter swore, and looked around. He could leave, get help. What would they do? For a convict who was sentenced to death? Maybe nothing.

As gently as he could manage, Peter pulled Neal fully onto the mattress and propped him up against the wall, straightening his legs. He moved to sit beside him, putting his left arm around Neal’s shoulders and supporting his head. Peter’s jacket had fallen to the side, so he picked it up and draped it across Neal’s chest. It was larger than Neal, and covered him past the waist.

“Neal,” he said. “You’ve got to wake up, okay? You’re smart, you can help me figure this out, how to help you. How to get you out of this. You’ve got to have ideas. We only get one shot, and I want to make it count.” Then a thought occurred to him. Maybe Neal wouldn’t want Peter to hold his Contract. Maybe he’d rather just…go…than be owned by someone else, by Peter, no matter how temporary. Maybe that was why he had fainted.

Peter shook his head. Didn’t matter. Even if Neal said no, he’d do it. He wasn’t going to let this kid go, not without a fight.

He was a little surprised by the possessiveness he felt, but…to be honest, he shouldn’t have been. How closely had he defended his role as lead on Caffrey’s case for years? How much had he looked forward to his check-in calls, to hearing about Caffrey while he was in prison? How difficult had it been to keep himself from actually visiting the work camp?

Neal’s skin under Peter’s fingers was cold. Without thinking, he rubbed a hand up and down on Neal’s arm, pulled him closer, trying to warm him. Up close, he could see how truly wrecked Neal was. He noticed the bits of food caught in his beard, which Neal was unable to clean. He noticed the way the man’s hair was dull and tangled. With his right hand, he tipped Neal’s chin up and noticed small rectangular burn marks, clearly from a taser.

It was inhumane, what the government was doing. As soon as he dealt with Neal’s situation, he was going to do something about it. What, and how, he didn’t know. But something.

Not knowing what else to do besides wait, Peter started talking. In a low voice, he told Neal how he had been keeping an eye on him for almost four years. He explained the oversight at the prison. He told Neal he was an absolute fucking idiot for trying to game the system and put his Contract up
for sale. He explained how much he detested Carl Friedrich on sight. He talked about Elizabeth, and training Diana, and how well Jones was doing. He told Neal how much he’d like Satchmo.

Finally, after what felt like hours – only fifteen minutes, according to Peter’s watch – Neal jumped and drew in a shuddering breath. He stiffened and fought against the restraints, against Peter’s arm.

“Hey, it’s okay. You’re fine,” said Peter. He held on tighter, until Neal found his equilibrium. He blinked up at Peter.

“What—“ Neal started coughing, large, hacking coughs.

Peter glanced around the room and spotted a bowl of water in the far corner. He eased himself away from Neal, settling him back against the wall, and crossed to the bowl. He looked down at it for a moment, and the empty bowl next to it, then squeezed his eyes shut. He suddenly realized exactly how Neal was forced to eat and drink in his confinement. It made him want to blast them both out of the Justice Facility with as much firepower as he could get his hands on. He had had decent thoughts about Henry Green on the way in, but the bastard was going to get a fist in his face on the way out.

He grabbed the bowl of water and returned to Neal, whose coughs were starting to subside. Carefully, he tipped the bowl to Neal’s lips. After a couple of missed attempts, they got the coordination right, and Neal drank greedily. When the bowl was empty, Peter set it aside and knelt beside the mattress.

“Thanks,” said Neal. “What happened?”

Peter smiled. “You passed out. After I told you I was going to try to buy your Contract.”

Neal’s eyes widened. “Right. You did say that. What…why…” Neal couldn’t seem to figure out what question he wanted to ask.

“Look,” said Peter, “I don’t have any idea what happened with Friedrich and the other inmate. You say you didn’t do it, I believe you. But whatever happened, because of the way these fucking laws are set up, you’re in an impossible situation. The only way I can come up with to fix this – to save your life – is to force a sale. If Friedrich isn’t the owner of record anymore, he has no say over your fate.”


Peter looked down at him. He realized something, then. No matter how much confidence and ego Caffrey displayed, no matter how smart he was, no matter how invincible he appeared…this man had no idea why anyone would stick their neck out for him. Which meant that, probably, no one ever had.

He sighed. “Because the world is a more interesting place with Neal Caffrey in it. Just doing my part.”

Neal dropped his eyes, and seemed to be staring very hard at Peter’s jacket. Peter looked away too. Emotional scenes weren’t his forte.

“You’d be okay with this?” Peter asked, after a moment. “I know it’s probably difficult to be…owned by anyone. But I wouldn’t be…it would just be to keep you safe, and it would be temporary.”

When Neal spoke, he did it quietly. “It’s going to cost a lot of money,” he said. “Maybe not for my
Contract, since it was so short, but…the other inmate was working off a ten year sentence. It’ll be expensive.”

“Yeah, we’re working on that piece,” Peter said. He had gotten the Contract prices yesterday, thanks to Hughes. Elizabeth had turned pale when he told her how much they were talking. If they took out a second mortgage, and cashed in their stock account, they could just about manage it. And yet, El hadn’t even asked if it was worth it. She had just wrapped her arms around him and told him they’d figure it out.

“I can pay you back,” Neal said. “Not right away, but I’ll pay you back. I swear it. If you do this for me…I’ll make it worth it for you.”

There was something about what Neal was saying that worried Peter.

“Neal, under no circumstances do I want you to commit more crimes to pay me back,” he said. “That is non-negotiable.”

Neal smiled. “Okay. No more crimes to pay you back, I promise.”

Peter narrowed his eyes. He knew what the loophole was – Neal probably had a stash of valuables somewhere, or cash accounts hidden from their eyes. But he’d make it clear, later, that he didn’t want that money either.

“So, you’re a smart guy,” said Peter, changing the subject. “Help me figure out how to do this. We need to file the Petition for Forced Sale by close of business tomorrow. Because this system is so new, it’s hard to say the best way to argue. I was thinking of filing under ‘extreme mistreatment,’ which seems clear, but the law does allow owners the right to determine Justice, including death, so a judge might find that extreme mistreatment is literally not possible in this case, no matter what is…happening here. Any ideas?”

“Well, you’re also going to run into problems with Friedrich,” said Neal.

“You think he’ll oppose the sale? All he kept talking about was ‘losses’ and how you wouldn’t be able to compensate him for that.”

“You don’t think he’ll oppose?” Neal frowned. “You met him. He seem like the kind of guy who just lets things go? He doesn’t really care about money. He cares about power.”

Peter frowned back. Neal had a point. If they ran into trouble with Friedrich, ‘extreme mistreatment’ was unlikely to sway a judge. Under the law, Friedrich was just exercising his rights.

Neal was staring at Peter’s jacket again.

“What if…” he trailed off for a second, and then looked up, a gleam in his eye. “So this whole system is premised on the fact that convicted felons need to return a value to society, right?”

“Right,” said Peter, wondering where Caffrey was going with this.

“PIA was put in place to provide an actual value benefit. Convicts work, produce product, whatever, and that monetary value is saved by society not having to pay for it.”

“And ESIA is an extension of that premise,” said Peter. “Privatizing the value-back system and allowing the free market to regulate that value. The government saves additional value on the cost of upkeep but still gets a benefit, and the private sector also gets a benefit.”
Neal nodded. “Instead of ‘extreme mistreatment,’ which – let’s face it, any system that legally treats people as objects is unlikely to ever find that – what if we argued that there will be a loss of benefit to society by allowing this object to be destroyed.”

“What are you thinking?” asked Peter. He tried to hide his smile, but it was hard. Watching Neal think, no matter his current physical situation, was fascinating. He had imagined it many times, but had never had the opportunity to actually watch it happen.

“Well, there are plenty of cases where the government steps in to protect property of value to society, right? Art, land, buildings…all of that can be protected because of some intrinsic value that society will lose if a private owner is allowed to destroy it.”

Peter nodded. “Okay, I see where this is going. What is your intrinsic value to society?” He cringed at how that sounded. He tried to soften the blow. “I mean, besides the obvious. You’re certainly easy on the eyes, but are you trying to declare yourself a work of art?”

Neal chuckled, and then looked down at Peter’s jacket again. “Look closely, just under the collar. There’s a little red…you see it?”

Peter leaned forward, and peered at his jacket. Peeking out from under the collar was a tiny red fiber. He plucked it out, holding it up. It wiggled slightly.

“This? They must have missed it at the cleaners. This is from a case I was working last week.” It had been a blow, literally. His team had been chasing a particularly slippery criminal, whom they called the “Dutchman,” for some time. They had gotten close several times, only to be outsmarted at every pass. This time, the guy had planted a bomb in a locker, and they had fallen for it. There had been a ton of these fibers all over the crime scene afterwards, and no one could tell him what they were.

Neal smiled smugly. “I can tell you what it is.”

Peter looked at him sharply. “How?”

Neal’s shoulder moved under the jacket, a cocky little shrug. “Come on, Peter. It’s what I do. This guy you’re chasing, he’s giving you some trouble, right?”

“Yeah. He’s good. Maybe as good as you.”

“Not possible.” Neal’s smile widened. “That fiber is the new security thread from the Canadian hundred dollar bill.”

Peter gaped at him. “Seriously? You’re sure?”

“Positive. You get me out of here, I can help you catch the guy. I can help you catch all the guys.”

Peter tilted his head to the side. “And that is your intrinsic value to society,” he murmured. “Smart, Neal. Very smart. This might actually work.”

Neal looked so pleased at the praise, it was all Peter could do not to reach out and ruffle his hair.
Chapter Eight: Promised

Thursday, June 24, 9:40AM

Neal had no idea how long Peter had been visiting. He had no idea how long he’d been out, if it was a few minutes or a few hours. His concept of time was completely destroyed.

But he did know one thing. No matter how physically miserable he was, the past however-long that Peter had been with him had been the best however-long he’d spent in four years. And the past few minutes? The absolute best of that best.

Sure, he was mortified by the condition Peter was seeing him in. Being so completely helpless was humiliating. But his brain still worked just fine, and having the opportunity to show Peter that, it… gave him some of his dignity back.

The look on Peter’s face when he told him about the security thread, about his idea to argue the Force Sale, it almost made everything that led up to this moment worth it. Peter had looked… impressed. Pleased. Proud.

Peter tilted his head to the side. “And that is your intrinsic value to society,” he murmured. “Smart, Neal. Very smart. This might actually work.”

“Let’s hope so,” said Neal. “Or else…adios, cruel world.” He grinned to show he was joking, sort of. Peter was really putting himself out there, and he didn’t want him to feel guilt if it didn’t work.

Peter began pacing the small space, a few steps one way, swivel, a few steps the other.

“This is good, Neal,” he said. “This is really good. For more than one reason.” He patted his pocket, and then frowned. “They have my damned phone. I need to make some calls.”

Neal felt a chill when he saw Peter glance at the cell door. Peter was going to leave. He knew it was coming, and he knew Peter had to leave in order to help him, but…he wanted to prolong this just a bit, if he could.

“Tell me what you’re thinking, Peter,” he said. “Let me think about it too. Not like I have other things to do.”

Peter turned back, and folded his arms across his chest. “Okay, genius. Chew on this. According to my probie—“

“Probie?”

“Probationary agent. She’s been working on the Petition for Forced Sale. According to her, it works like this: first, we file the Petition and serve it on the owner of record. He then has five days
to contest the Petition. If he doesn’t contest, then the sale, at the proposed compensation, goes through automatically. If he does contest, there’s an arbitration. The arbitrator makes a decision, which is binding, but can be appealed to a judge, who will hold a hearing. This is why they gave you a two-week Stay, to allow for the first round, and two extensions, to allow for the arbitration and appeals.”

“Okay,” said Neal. “Seems pretty straightforward. So our possible angles are to persuade Friedrich not to contest, to win at arbitration, or to win at appeal.”

“Exactly. In order to persuade Friedrich not to contest, we can make a really good offer. Sweeten the pot, by offering more than he paid, or some other form of compensation. You know him better than any of us do. Think about that angle.”

Neal licked his lips. He had only spent three weeks in the man’s company, but he had learned a lot about him. He was a quick study, after all. Unfortunately, it cut both ways. Friedrich might want Neal dead to silence him. The man definitely had things he wanted to keep quiet. That could also be used against Friedrich, since the Stay was already in place. Nothing stopping Neal from talking now, to Peter…but Neal didn’t really want to get into any of that yet. He’d save it for later, an ace in the hole. But he could plant the seed.

“We could also literally persuade him,” said Neal. “Figure out his weak spots and apply pressure.”

Peter frowned. “Sounds like witness tampering and intimidation,” he said. “Nope. Too risky. We need to do this right.” He paused. “But I want to know what those weak spots are, anyway. Think about that, and I’ll put one of my own people on it, too.”

Neal tried not to smile. He knew Peter would balk at anything that wasn’t legal, but he also knew Peter was smart. He’d want the information even if he wasn’t going to let himself use it. His own ace in the hole. Neal nodded. “Got it. I can tell you right now that Friedrich thinks of himself as a big fish. If we can find a way to make him come out looking good – powerful and respectable and admirable – he might go for it.”

“Good start. I’ll have our AUSA and Diana work on the actual intrinsic value argument. I bet Margaret will love it, she hates ESIA. But there’s one more thing.” Peter focused on Neal, his gaze so probing that Neal would have felt even more naked than he already was if it was possible. “This intrinsic value thing…it may have even more benefit to us than as an ultimate argument. What happens when someone wants to save an historic building from destruction?”

Neal considered. “It gets held by a third party until the dispute is resolved. Preserved. The owner is not allowed to lower its value while the issue is contested.”

“Right. So…would you say your value is being lowered, held in here like this?”

Neal caught on. Damn, Peter was smart. It was thrilling, really, to be able to talk with him like this. “I would definitely say that,” Neal said. “Restrained, freezing, starved, under threat of death…it’s a wonder I haven’t gone crazy already.”

“I agree,” said Peter. “So what we need is for your value to be preserved.”

“What are you thinking? Better cell conditions?” Neal tried not to let his heart leap in hope. He’d give anything to have the use of his hands. A blanket. More than one meal every day and a half.

“I’m thinking bigger. I could request that you be transferred over the to work camp here, to a cell there. Or, I could request that you be let out, into my custody.”
Neal frowned. “That would be amazing. But they wouldn’t go for it. You’re not a third party.”

“No, but I have a vested interest in maintaining your ‘value.’ And…maybe we could sell it as a trial run. To allow you to prove your value.” Peter was looking very smug at that. “After all, you’re claiming you’ll provide this benefit, but how does anyone actually know without putting you to the test?”

Neal was finding it hard to breathe. If this worked, it meant he could be out of here, really and truly out of here, in a week. Maybe less. A judge could order this, and it wouldn’t have to wait for a contest of the Petition or an arbitration. He felt tears gathering in his eyes and tried to gulp them back.

Peter seemed to understand, giving him a moment. When he was back under control, Peter continued.

“So what do you think? Do you think you could actually help us catch this guy, the one with the Canadian security thread? Quickly?”

Neal thought for a minute. “I do. You’re thinking you’ll ask for the trial run to prove the alleged value, and if we’re successful, it makes our arbitration argument stronger.”

“It could also weaken it. If we’re not successful, it could shoot us in the foot.”

Neal bit his lip. He had to have confidence in himself. He had to, or this was never going to work. What did he really have to lose? They needed to take a real swing at this, with everything at their disposal, or he was sunk anyway.

“Let’s go for it,” he said. “I can do it.”

Peter nodded. “Good. I think so too.” He glanced over his shoulder. “Listen, I hate to – to leave you here, but I’ve got to set the wheels in motion. We’ll get this filed no later than tomorrow, try to get right before a judge, and maybe if we’re lucky…”

“You’ll come pick me up.”

“Yeah.” Peter seemed to be thinking, hard. He stepped forward, and crouched down, his face mere inches from Neal’s. “One more thing. If we do this, and they release you into my custody…Neal, you can’t try to escape. You can’t do anything that would jeopardize our chances. You have to trust me.”

“I won’t run, Peter,” said Neal. He wouldn’t, he wouldn’t run…unless they were about to take him back, and then he might…but he had to convince Peter he absolutely would not step a toe over the line. “I promise. Nothing to screw this up.”

“And you’ll trust me? You’ll trust me that even if it looks bad, I won’t let you down?”

Something inside Neal broke in half. Somehow, Peter knew that it was when he was backed into a corner that he did crazy things. That he had a hard time relying on anyone but himself. He swallowed hard.

“I’ll trust you. I promise.”

Peter patted him on the shoulder. “Okay. Then I’ll trust you.” He moved towards the door.

“Wait,” said Neal. “Your jacket.”
Peter smiled. “Keep it. It looks good on you.”

Neal shook his head. “They’ll take it,” he said.

“Keep it until they take it.” He turned towards the door and banged on it three times. The metal clanged in response, echoing in the small space. Neal took deep breaths, knowing his lifeline was about to walk out the door.

He made himself speak. “Whatever happens, Peter…thanks for coming.”

Peter turned back. “Neal, I’m coming back. Either way, I’m coming back.”

“Okay,” said Neal.

“I promise,” said Peter.

Then the guard opened the door, and Peter gave him one last wave and stepped out. The door closed behind him. The locks clicked.

Neal burrowed under Peter’s jacket and closed his eyes. Even if Peter never returned, at least he had been able to have one last good moment.
Chapter Summary

The Caffrey Team works toward their goal of freeing Neal.

Chapter Nine: Determined

Thursday, June 24, 10:15AM

Walking away from Neal’s cell was one of the hardest things Peter had had to do in a long time. He tried not to dwell on the restraints, his physical condition. He tried to remember the conversation, the brainstorming, how he had left his jacket…and maybe no one would notice that for a while, at least.

He had returned the borrowed taser to the officer as soon as the cell door locked behind him, giving him a look.

“I was wondering,” he said, his voice grim, “what possible reason there could be to taser a man who is fully restrained like that?”

The officer cleared his throat. “Procedure,” he said.

“What kind of procedure?” Peter gritted his teeth.

“When we take an inmate for a shower, it’s the approved method for immobilizing them during the process. No permanent damage, better than drugs.” The officer had the decency to look uncomfortable, at least, as if he didn’t really believe it but was parroting a manual.

Peter clenched his fists. He had to hold it together, because if he started punching people it would jeopardize his case. It was best to let things be until he could get back, otherwise someone might take it out on Neal, and…he wasn’t sure how much more the man could withstand.

With that in mind, he decided to bypass Henry Green’s office on the way out. If he had to look a man in the face who would order conditions like Caffrey was in, he knew he would lose it. He simply collected his phone, speed-walked to the main security gate, gathered his weapons, and barreled towards his car.

His first call was to Diana.

“New strategy,” he said. “Listen closely.”

He described the intrinsic value argument and the preservation of value trial run idea.

She murmured an approval. “It’s good,” she said. “What did you come up with for extreme mistreatment? Other than the obvious?”

“I think the value argument is our winner,” he replied. “But I will need to describe the conditions of his current imprisonment to make the trial run argument. I’ll write it up when I get back to the office.” Peter didn’t think he’d be able to say it out loud. It was going to be hard enough to write up
his report. “Can I task you with looping in Margaret Beechwood, getting her thoughts? I should be back in less than an hour.”

“Sure thing. If it’s okay with you, I think I’ll put Jones on the Dutchman piece. Get him to find out if Neal’s right about that red fiber. We can explain the investigation and its importance.”

“Good idea. We’ll want to ask the court to keep that information private, so mention that to Beechwood as well.”

“On it, boss.”

Next, he called Elizabeth.

“How is he?” she asked, without saying hello.

“Not good,” said Peter, honestly. “El, if you had seen him…”

“I spoke with the mortgage company,” she said. “We’ve got enough increased equity in the house to refinance with cash out rather than take out a second mortgage. Between that and the stock account, we’ll have more than enough to cover those contracts. If you needed to high ball the offer.”

Peter smiled. “You read my mind. Okay, put it in action, but don’t pull the trigger yet. And El? Thank you. For being so great about this. I know it’s a lot to ask.”

“Damn straight it is. But you wouldn’t be you if you didn’t ask it. And I’m excited to finally meet this infamous Neal Caffrey.”

“You’ll like him,” said Peter. “He’s smart. And you guys have the same taste in art and food.”

She laughed. “Finally, a man with taste will be in my house. One thing…are you sure he’s not going to run?”

Peter sighed. “No. I’m not. But he says he won’t, so I’m trusting him…and the GPS collar he’ll be fitted with.”

“Good enough for me. Will you be home for dinner?”

“I don’t know yet. We’re filing this thing tomorrow.” He explained their strategy.

“So he might be with us tomorrow night,” she said.

“We can only hope,” said Peter. “I can’t leave him in there any longer than absolutely necessary, so I’m going to do my best to get him out.”

“Then whether you’re home for dinner or not, I know how I’m spending my evening. There’s a lot of storage in the guest room that will have to be moved up to the attic.”

Trust his brilliant wife to think of everything. “You are literally the best, El. I’ll try to get home to help.”

“Well, lots to do. Bye, hon,” she said.

Peter felt an almost desperate ache in his chest after he hung up the phone. Part of it was because Elizabeth was in this, really in it, along with him. His life had definitely gone up in value when she had entered it, and asking her out was the best decision he had ever made.
Part of it was the idea that, tomorrow evening, there was a possibility he’d have rescued Neal Caffrey from his nightmare and have him right in his very own house. This decision felt no less important than the other.


**Thursday, June 24, 4:40PM**

Margaret Beechwood was just as excited about the intrinsic value argument as Peter and Neal had been.

“It’s brilliant, Peter,” she said, later that afternoon. The Caffrey Team, as he was now thinking about it, was fully assembled in the conference room at the White Collar offices.

“You think it will work?”

“I really do. There’s a ton of applicable precedent for the idea that the government can transfer ownership of items of value to society and prevent their destruction. You said Caffrey came up with the argument?” She was clicking away at her laptop and taking rapid notes on a yellow legal pad.

“That’s right.”

“He’d make a fair lawyer,” she said. “If it weren’t for his pesky felony record, I’d recommend law school.”

“There is one thing,” said Diana. “We were talking about how it’s kind of a shame Caffrey only has a few months left on his sentence. In a way, that limits the value we can argue.”

“Because how much benefit could he provide in only a few months. There’s nothing obligating him to continue working for the FBI after the Contract ends. That’s true. How do we get around that?” asked Peter.

Jones cleared his throat. “Well, here’s what I’m thinking. You said Friedrich didn’t file for an extension of his sentence to compensate him for the value of the murdered inmate because he thought Caffrey was too dangerous to have around, right?”

“Right. And he’s not dangerous. That’s utterly ridiculous. This kid is totally non-violent.” Peter didn’t have any qualms about that. Neal hadn’t been responsible for the other inmate’s death, he believed that wholeheartedly.

“But an extension of the Contract would have been a valid response by Friedrich. He could easily have gotten even ten years out of Caffrey to make up for the ten years of service he had lost.” Jones leaned back in his chair. “So the system approves extension of Contract as a way to increase or preserve value.”

Peter nodded. “You’re thinking we tell the court we don’t just want to force a sale for the remainder of Caffrey’s initial Contract. That we want to do what Friedrich did not…we’re not worried about safety, so we’ll take over the extra time.”

“Which would increase the value to society, which would strengthen our argument for the forced sale.” Diana finished the thought, and turned her attention to Beechwood. “What do you think, Margaret?”

Beechwood had stopped clicking, and was thinking. “I think we need to make that part of it,” she
said. “It really does make things more enticing from the perspective of the premise of preserving value.”

Peter frowned. That hadn’t been part of his conversation with Neal. In fact, he had specifically noted that his ownership of the Contract was temporary. Still…it was better than a death sentence. He could go back, talk to Neal, see if Neal would go for it. Or he could just do it, and deal with the consequences once Neal was out.

“Let’s do it,” he said. “How much time do we want to ask for?”

“Ten years would be logical,” said Jones, “since we’re paying for that Contract too.”

“But it seems unfair,” said Diana. “His original Contract was only four.”

“Well,” said Beechwood, “why don’t we ask for four, then? Doubling his initial sentence to increase the value to society. If the judge asks why not ten, we can argue that there’s no actual proof that Caffrey committed the murder.”

“Okay,” said Peter. “Go for four.” He turned to the man sitting at the end of the table. Hughes had been silent during most of their conversation, frowning and rubbing his chin. “Reese, what are you thinking?”

Hughes sighed. “I’m wondering if this is a good idea,” he said. “I’m on board with saving this kid’s life, but…working for the FBI? You think he’s not going to get into even more trouble?”

Peter shrugged. “Honestly, I don’t know. He’s brilliant, though.”

“So are you, some would say.”

“Yeah, so imagine having two of me working on cases. And he’s got…information, training, connections that we just don’t have. We’ve worked with CIs before.”

Hughes nodded. “Well, I’m on board for the trial run at the very least. I’ll trust you, but it’s on your head if this goes south.”

“Absolutely. I’ll take full responsibility.” Inwardly, Peter breathed a sigh of relief. For a moment, he had been worried Hughes was going to torpedo the whole plan.

Beechwood looked around, then snapped her laptop shut. “Okay troops, I’ve got all your statements, I’ve got the case law, I’m going to go home, change into something much more comfortable, and write the hell out of this Petition. I’ll have affidavits for you to sign in the morning, Peter. You too, Reese.”

“I’ve got Elizabeth on the financial piece, so if we need to have cash available as a good faith payment, let me know and we’ll make it happen,” said Peter, getting to his feet. “Diana, Jones, I want you two back on the Dutchman. Pull together a file that I can give to Caffrey as soon as we spring him, start figuring out where our next leads are. We can’t lose any time on this once the clock starts ticking on the trial run.”

“Got it,” said Jones.

Diana looked over at Beechwood, who was gathering her things. “Actually,” she said, “I was thinking I might also be of additional help with the Petition. If you come up with any questions while you’re writing.”
Beechwood smiled. “A second brain and set of eyes is always welcome. You mind working at my place? I have a process, and it involves a comfortable sofa.”

Peter looked between the two women. “Okay, fine. Diana, you can be in touch with Jones from there, work on both pieces.”

Hughes stood. “All right, everyone. Let’s get this done, so we can get back to actual investigating.” He shot a stern look at Peter, but underneath, Peter could see the understanding in his eyes.

“Thank you, Reese.”

The team scattered, leaving Peter to stare out the windows at the city below. He felt good about this, confident. They were going to win.

That awful feeling in the pit of his stomach was not because he was worried about the outcome. It was because he couldn’t stop picturing Neal, stuck in that horrible little cell.

*I’m coming back*, he thought. *I promise.*
Chapter Ten: Reprieved

Friday, June 25, 3:20PM

When he heard the locks clicking on his cell door, Neal tensed. It was habit. Before Peter’s visit… yesterday? It was probably yesterday by now…every time the door opened there were three possibilities. First, it could be a meal, which was the best of the three. Second, it could be time for one of those freezing showers, where they would stick the taser on his neck and shoot a bolt of electricity through him to daze him, then string him up and hose him off before shoving him back in his cell to shiver until he dried off. Third, it could be that his time was up.

Now, there was a fourth possibility: that Peter was coming back. So far, he had gotten one more meal, and supposedly his time wouldn’t be up for another couple of weeks at least. So…shower or Peter.

He was lying on his back again. It was the best position, since his body created the most warmth between it and the mattress this way.

He opened his eyes as the door opened. It wasn’t Peter. It was one of the officers, and he was holding the taser out in front of him as he strode forward. Shower, then. Neal clenched his teeth, knowing from experience that as soon as that electricity hit him, he was likely to bite his tongue.

Suddenly, a hand gripped the officer’s shoulder and pulled him backwards.

“Get the hell away from him.”

Neal blinked, his teeth unclenching and his mouth dropping open. It was Peter, and his face was murderous. He shoved the officer backwards, back out of the cell, as the officer protested loudly.

“Agent Burke, we have to —“

“You have to back away from him immediately. Go check with Green – the court order is clear. No further harm is to come to this inmate. And that includes shooting him with electricity.” Peter braced himself in the doorway, blocking Neal from the officer and his taser. Neal could only see his back, but Peter was practically vibrating.

“Whatever,” said the officer. “Fucking asshole.”

Peter took a step back, and the officer closed the cell door. Relief coursed through Neal. He had heard two words in there – court order – that filled him with hope. Had their plan actually worked?

Peter turned to look at him, dropping a black duffel bag on the floor.

Neal smiled. “You came back,” he said.
“I promised,” said Peter, shrugging. “They take my jacket?”

“Actually,” Neal thrust his chin towards the wall. “Check under the mattress.”

Peter leaned over and yanked his jacket out from under the mattress. “Seriously?” he said. “Not doing you much good there.”

“Hey, it took me forever to get it under there. Thanks would be nice.” He shot Peter a mischievous look, and Peter just shook his head. He shook out the jacket and tossed it on top of the duffel.

“So,” he said, “do you want the good news, or the bad news?”

Neal narrowed his eyes. “The good news,” he said, cautiously. What could the bad news possibly be?

“The good news is that phase one worked like a charm. The judge was on board with the preservation of value argument and, even better, she held that there was a likelihood of success on the Forced Sale.”

Neal’s heart leapt. “Really?”

“Really. She seemed impressed with the arguments, and even said that, if you proved that you could contribute to bringing down dangerous criminals and that you could be trusted not to run and not to get into any more trouble, she couldn’t imagine Friedrich being able to successfully contest the Forced Sale.”

“I like her already,” said Neal.

“Yeah, I thought you might. She remembered you, you know.”

That caught Neal’s attention. “How?”

“She was the same judge who presided over your criminal trial four years ago.”

Neal smiled. “I remember her, too. She was a good judge. Fair.”

Peter nodded. “It was a calculated risk, bringing the Petition before her. It was actually Margaret Beechwood’s idea, and she clearly knew what she was doing when she suggested it. It helps that she’s anti-ESIA.”

Neal didn’t know who Margaret Beechwood was, but figured he would find out soon enough.

“So what now?” Neal asked. He glanced over at the duffel, wondered what was inside it.

“Well…that’s also good news. I’m here to get you out of here.”

Neal wiggled until he was sitting up. He’d have jumped up and down if there were any way that was possible. “They agreed to let me out into your custody?”

“They did.”

Neal heard the but embedded within his words. He waited.

“You ready for the bad news?” asked Peter.

“Lay it on me,” said Neal. “As long as I’m getting out, everything else is minor.”
“I’m glad you feel that way, and I’ll ask you to remember this moment in four months.”

There was something ominous about the way Peter was talking.

“Peter…what did you do?”

Peter sighed. “If this works, and they allow the Forced Sale, your Contract is going to be a lot longer than four months.”

Neal chewed on his bottom lip. Of course. In order to make the value argument work, he had to provide more than four months worth of value. And why would anyone trust that he would continue to work on the side of the law after his Contract had expired?

“How long?” asked Neal. He knew that the other inmate’s Contract had been for ten years, so he braced himself for the worst.

“We requested a four year extension,” said Peter. “We thought a doubling of your initial Contract sounded fair, and would provide substantial weight to the value argument. I thought about coming back and asking for your okay, but…”

Neal shook his head furiously. “It’s fine. It’s great. Four years, no problem. I can do four years.”

Peter grinned. “Glad you’re being reasonable. Also, once this is over, we can always revisit the four years, see if we can shave any of it off.”

“Did you seriously think I would have a problem with this? What’s my other choice, Peter? I thought you said I was smart.”

“That I did. Okay, so let’s get these things off of you.”

Peter reached into a pocket and pulled out a set of keys.

“They let you have the keys?” asked Neal, incredulously. “I would have thought one of the officers —”

“I was very insistent,” said Peter, smirking. “There was a lot of…yelling…about preservation of value.”

Neal couldn’t suppress his glee at the mental image of Peter yelling at a bunch of the officers who had held him. It made the way he had manhandled the one with the taser seem like child’s play.

And now he was going to get to work with this man and see him in action every day.

Peter shuffled through the keys, found one he was looking for, and gestured at Neal’s hands. “Let’s start with this,” he said. Carefully, he lifted Neal’s arms up. Neal tried not to react as Peter located the locks on the underside of each of his elbows, but he couldn’t stop his moan as the metal was peeled away from his skin.

“Okay,” said Peter softly. He threw the restraints behind him, where they hit the opposite wall with a clatter. Then he carefully helped Neal lower his arms and separate his hands. Neal looked at them and swallowed hard. His hands were shriveled and pale white, and seemed…smaller, somehow. Along his arms and just above his elbows were ugly red marks, swollen, where the skin had been rubbed raw, scabbed over, and rubbed raw again.

Peter went to the duffel, unzipped it, and rummaged around. When he returned, he had a bottle and some gauze in his hands.
“This is going to sting,” he said.

Neal nodded. Peter tipped some of the liquid in the bottle onto a pad of gauze, and carefully wrapped his arms and elbows. He left Neal’s hands free, and Neal let out a breath of relief. He tried to move his fingers, but found that somehow, the signals just weren’t getting from his brain to his hands properly. All he could manage was a twitch.

Peter saw it. “Don’t rush it,” he said. After a moment, he took Neal’s hands in his, and began to rub his thumbs in circles over Neal’s palms. Neal realized he couldn’t really feel anything in his hands. They were numb. After a minute, however, he started to feel something... a warm sort of pressure, wherever Peter’s fingers were.

Peter continued these attentions until Neal’s fingers began to tingle. He let out another moan. It was almost painful, but also a relief. After a while – his sense of time was still screwed up – he had enough feeling to be able to wiggle all of his fingers, but he still couldn’t make a fist.

“It’ll come back,” said Peter, and Neal believed him.

Next, Peter shuffled the keys again, and turned his attention to the manacles above Neal’s knees. Neal braced himself. Those were the ones that hurt the most when he moved, because they were so tight. He knew he was a mess underneath.

Sure enough, as Peter peeled the metal off, it looked like it took most of Neal’s skin with it. He was bleeding freely now that the blood had somewhere to go. Neal had wrapped his arms around his waist as if he was trying to hold himself together, but it was the only way he could keep from crying out.

Peter was mumbling things softly – Neal couldn’t hear it properly – but then the skin above his knees was on fire, and he yelped.

“Shhh,” said Peter. “We’ve got to clean this good – you might still have an infection. These fucking idiots,” he muttered.

Peter worked on his legs for a while, and Neal became very aware how naked he still was. Peter’s hands were awfully close to... he brought his arms down and covered himself with his hands. Peter noticed, and chuckled.

“It’s a little late for modesty, I think,” he said. Neal left his hands where they were.

When Peter was done, however, and had wrapped that area in gauze as well, Neal separate his legs for the first time in weeks. It pulled at his ankle restraints, but he didn’t care, and let out a relieved sigh.

“Careful,” said Peter. “Let’s not make these worse.”

“Peter,” said Neal, “aren’t you going to... I mean, you got a GPS collar in that bag?”

“I do,” said Peter, moving to unlock the ankle manacles.

“You don’t want to put that on before you... let me out of those?”

Peter looked up at him, and at the closed cell door. “You planning on trying to escape?”

Neal shook his head.
“Knock me out?”

“No, of course not.”

Peter laughed. “Frankly, Neal, I don’t think you’ll be able to move enough to get anywhere for a while. I’m not worried.”

They went through a similar process with the ankle manacles as they had with the ones above Neal’s knees, though the skin wasn’t quite as raw there. By the time Peter was done with his ministrations, Neal was practically floating. He couldn’t really feel the pain, anymore. He wondered what was in the liquid Peter had soaked him with. Or if someone had slipped him a drug while he wasn’t looking.

Neal stretched his legs, one by one, moving them separately from one another. Moving his legs had never felt so good before. Neal closed his eyes and lay back against the mattress. He could honestly fall asleep right now, that’s how relaxed he was all of a sudden. He felt himself starting to drift.

“Woah, stay with me, Neal,” said Peter. He felt Peter’s arm under his back, lifting him up, and struggled to open his eyes. Peter smiled down at him. “Feeling better already, huh?”

Neal nodded. He forced his eyes open farther. “I’m not sure I can move. I guess you were right.”

“I’m always right,” said Peter. “Good you figured that out early.” He frowned.

“What’s…the matter?” Neal managed.

“Now it’s time for your collar,” said Peter. “I’d like to wait…and I don’t think you’re going anywhere anytime soon, not on your own. But it’s a condition of release.”

“S’okay,” mumbled Neal. “Put it on.”

Peter pulled at Neal so he was propped against the wall, and Neal tried to help best he could. Then the black circle was being fitted around Neal’s neck, and he heard it click into place, and let out a long, high-pitched beep. Neal winced at the sound.

“How’s that?” Peter asked. Neal could feel his fingers pushing between the collar and Neal’s neck, testing the fit. “Too tight?”

Neal swallowed. He could feel the collar, but it wasn’t going to strangle him. “Fine,” he said.

“This collar is going to start out electronically tethered to me,” said Peter. “So make sure you stay by my side. Once we’re home, I’ll set a radius for the house, and then we’ll adjust it as necessary so you can work. I’ve got to present records to the Court of your movements every three days, so… best behavior.”

“Peter, this thing gives off an electric shock if I even approach the edge of a boundary,” said Neal. “I’ve had enough of those to last a lifetime, thanks. Just make sure you’re clear on exactly where I can and can’t go. I don’t fancy running tests.”

Peter smiled. “Noted. Clear instructions.”

He left Neal’s side again, and rummaged in the duffel once more. When he turned around, he had a bundle of material in his hands.
Clothes. The idea of putting something on reminded Neal that he was still naked, and freezing. The relief of being out of the restraints had distracted him for a bit, but the discomfort was back. He started to shiver uncontrollably.

Peter was back in an instant. “Do you want me to help you with these, or—“

“Just, give them to me,” said Neal, through chattering teeth. “I’ll do it.”

How, he wasn’t sure. Peter dropped the clothes on his lap and stepped back, sort of hovering, and that made Neal want to do this by himself even more. After three weeks of being completely helpless, he needed to do something on his own.

His hands still weren’t working properly, but, fumbling, he managed to get his head through the neckhole of the green sweatshirt, and his arms through the sleeves. He wasn’t sure if he had it on backwards or not, but didn’t care. It was soft, and smelled like fresh laundry, and immediately some of the shakes began to subside.

Carefully, he got one leg of the matching track pants on, and then the other. He paused to catch his breath. He was going to need to boost himself up to put them on the rest of the way, and he wasn’t sure he could do it on his own.

Peter returned to his side, kneeling on the floor next to him. “Put your arm on my shoulder,” he said quietly.

Neal gratefully did as he was told, and that provided just enough leverage to shove himself down and into the track pants without having to fully grip them with his useless hand.

He collapsed back on the mattress and heaved a sigh of relief.

“Look at you,” said Peter. “All presentable.”

Neal made a face. “I need a shower. A hot one,” he specified.

“Yeah, I think we can arrange that. Stay there.”

Neal closed his eyes, beat from the ordeal of getting dressed. He inhaled deeply, trying to get that as much of that fresh laundry smell as possible before he ruined it. He felt Peter at his feet, and realized Peter was putting socks and shoes on him. He let it happen. There was no way he was going to be able to maneuver something like shoelaces.

Neal heard the duffel zip closed, and opened his eyes.

“Okay, Caffrey,” said Peter. “Let’s get this show on the road.”

He slung the duffel over one shoulder, then lowered himself to the floor again. He snaked an arm around Neal’s waist and pulled him into a sitting position, then positioned Neal’s arm around Peter’s shoulders.

“Ready?” asked Peter. “On three. One, two—“

Peter hauled Neal to his feet. Neal tried to get his feet under him, but every time he felt like one was solidly in place, the other would give in.

“Sorry,” he said. “I can’t seem to…”

“It’s fine,” said Peter. “Do what you can, I’ll do the rest.”
Peter kicked the door three times, and after a minute, it opened. The officer Peter had shoved glared at them, but stepped aside.

They hobbled down the hall to the elevator, and by the time they got there, Neal’s legs were working a little better. He couldn’t quite hold himself up, but he was able to take more of his weight.

The journey out of the Justice Facility and back to the car seemed to take forever, and Neal wasn’t sure he didn’t pass out a few times. He thought he remembered hearing Peter have a conversation with someone, and there might have been a few minutes that he was sitting in a chair, but it was a blur. Next thing he knew, he was sitting in a very comfortable, very warm car, and Peter was buckling him in.

The door slammed, and he watched Peter move out of sight. Neal closed his eyes. The car bounced a little as Peter threw the duffel in the trunk, and then he was back, getting into the car.

“You okay?” asked Peter, once he was settled.

Neal nodded, and forced his eyes open again. “Yeah. Fine. I’m… I’m falling asleep, I think.”

Peter smiled. “I think you’re right. Go ahead and sleep on the way home, and then we’ll let you get that shower and something to eat, okay?”

“What about…” Neal trailed off.

“What about what?” asked Peter. He started up the car, shifted into gear.

“The Dutchman,” said Neal. “Have to… catch him.”

Peter laughed. “We will. I’ve got a whole case file for you to look at. But let’s take care of sleep and food first.”

“Peter?” Neal fought the waves of tiredness that were threatening to overwhelm him. He had to get this out.

“Yeah?”

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome, Neal.”

Neal smiled, sank back into his seat, and let the sleep come.
Chapter Summary

Peter brings Neal home and introduces him to Elizabeth.

Chapter Eleven: Settled

Friday, June 25, 6:00PM

Peter maneuvered the Taurus into a spot in front of his house, and shut off the engine. He turned to look at his passenger.

Neal was snoring softly, his mouth slightly open. Peter smiled. He couldn’t quite explain the relief he had felt as soon as they pulled away from Prince Correctional Camp an hour earlier. The ordeal of the past three days...learning that Neal was missing, that his Contract had been sold, that his owner had surrendered him to Justice...then coming up with their strategy and going before the judge...Peter felt like he had been running a marathon. He didn’t think his heart had stopped pounding. He certainly hadn’t slept.

They weren’t out of the woods, he had to remember that. There was still an uphill battle. If Neal was right, Friedrich would contest the Forced Sale, and they would have to fight back. They had to start by bringing down the Dutchman, and even that was a long shot. Maybe he should have offered a smaller prey than the Dutchman, something a little more guaranteed.

But then they might not have even gotten this far. No, he had to have faith in Neal. After all, it was Neal’s life on the line. He would be properly motivated.

Then, of course, he had to worry about whether Neal would run, or do something stupid and illegal. Best not to think too hard about that for now, or else he’d drive himself crazy.

He wondered if he should have taken Neal to the hospital. The wounds around where his restraints had been were nasty, and maybe a specialist should look at the kid’s hands. Peter knew Neal would protest the delay, and frankly, he didn’t relish the idea of handing Neal over to anyone else, not yet. After thinking it over, he had called Elizabeth on the way home, asked her to get things ready to draw a bath – no way was Neal going to be able to stand for a shower – and to see if there were any local physicians who’d make a house call.

Now, he pulled out his phone and called Elizabeth again.

“Hey, hon,” he said softly, when she picked up. “We’re here.”

“Good,” she said. “I found a doctor who’s willing to do a house call tomorrow morning. I wasn’t sure when you’d be back, or what shape he’d be in, so I figured that was easier.”

“Perfect,” said Peter. “He’s asleep. I’d let him sleep longer, but I want him to be more comfortable than he can possibly be in the seat of the car.”

“I’ll be right out to help you,” she said. “Let me just start the water for the bath.”
He slid his phone back into his pocket and stepped out of the car. By the time he had retrieved the duffel from the trunk, Elizabeth had appeared. She bent down and peered in the passenger window.

“That’s him, huh?” she said. “He looks…”

“Like hell,” finished Peter.

“Actually, I was going to say, he looks so innocent.”

Peter snorted. “Believe me, looks can be deceiving. He is far from innocent.”

“Well, I can’t believe I finally get to meet him in person, after hearing about him for so many years. And now…I guess he’s ours.”

“For the time being, anyway,” said Peter. “Thank you for being so great about this.”

She straightened up and kissed him. “Thank you for being the sort of man who would even ask. But I do expect really great birthday, Christmas, and anniversary gifts for the rest of our natural lives.”

“Consider it done. Hey, with Caffrey around, I probably won’t forget anymore. That’s one way he can work off his debt.”

She laughed. “Let’s get him inside.”

Peter opened the door and reached in to unbuckle Neal’s seatbelt. Then he shook the man’s shoulder.

“Neal?” he said. “Wake up.”

Neal jolted awake, his eyes wide. He jerked away from Peter, scrambling backwards, nearly clear across the center console. Then his eyes cleared, and he looked around. He smiled sheepishly.

“Sorry,” he said. “Just…startled me, I guess.”

“It’s fine,” said Peter. “We’re home. And this is my wife, Elizabeth.”

Neal edged himself forward, swinging his legs out of the car. He grinned up at Elizabeth, teeth flashing and eyes sparkling, giving her the full force of Caffrey Charm.

“It’s a pleasure to finally meet you, Elizabeth. Peter definitely did not do you justice.”

Elizabeth laughed, and held out her hand. “Finally, I get to meet the great Neal Caffrey. It’s an honor,” she said.

“Great, huh? What did he say about me?” Neal’s gaze flickered to Peter with a mischievous glint. “Did the words ‘genius’ or ‘prodigy’ come up?”

Peter rolled his eyes. “More like ‘pain in my ass’ and ‘cocky son of a bitch.’ Can we go inside?”

Neal pushed himself up, and managed to get mostly to his feet, leaning heavily on the car. Without saying anything, Peter handed the duffel to Elizabeth and offered his shoulder. Neal transferred his weight from the car to Peter. They made their way up the steps to the house. Peter wrapped his arm around Neal’s waist to help him, but he was doing better than he had been at the Justice Facility.

Once inside, Peter helped Neal onto the sofa.
“You have a beautiful home,” he said, looking around. “Let me guess, Elizabeth did the decorating?”

“What, did Peter’s suits give him away?” asked Elizabeth.

“I see how this is going to go,” said Peter. “No ganging up on me, or the deal is off.” He could hear the water running in the bathroom. “We’ve got a bath going,” he told Neal. “Why don’t I help you with that while El gets dinner?”

Neal’s eyes lit up – at the concept of the bath or dinner, Peter wasn’t sure.

“What are you in the mood for, Neal?” asked Elizabeth. “I could do something with chicken, or we could order pizza, or if you want something else I could make that happen.”

“Any of what you just said is fine,” said Neal. He swallowed rapidly. Peter wondered when he had last had anything to eat. He probably should have brought a power bar to the Justice Facility. Or Gatorade, at least. He went into the kitchen and grabbed a bottle of water, and then returned to the living room.

“Dealer’s choice, El,” said Peter. “Come on, Neal. You stink.”

Neal wrinkled his nose. “Sorry.”

Peter smiled. “Seriously, not your fault.”

He helped Neal up the stairs, and then leaned him up against the sink while he tested the temperature of the bath and turned off the water.

“Okay,” he said. “You’ve got towels there, and El put out some other things. Toothpaste, toothbrush, razor, shaving cream, you get the idea. Can you manage without drowning, or do you want me to stay?”

“I can manage,” said Neal. “I’m already feeling better.”

“All right. I’ll be back to check on you in a bit.” He set the bottle of water on the counter. “Water, in case you need it.”

Neal eyed the water bottle hungrily. “Yeah, that would…that would be great.”

“The collar is waterproof, but you’ll want to remove the bandages. I can rewrap everything when you’re done.” He gestured at a pile of gauze, tape, and antibiotic cream on the counter. El had done an amazing job setting things up. “New clothes there, too, under the towels, in case you don’t want to put those back on.”

Neal nodded, and Peter turned toward the door. “Just holler if you need anything,” he said.

“Got it. Thanks, Peter.”

Peter exited the bathroom and closed the door. He stood there for a minute, listening. At first, there was nothing. He waited a full four minutes. He almost knocked, but then, he heard soft sounds of movement, an eventual splash, and a loud groan. He smiled. He’d come back to make sure the kid wasn’t drowning, but for a while he’d let him enjoy.

Downstairs, Elizabeth was perusing takeout menus. She glanced up when Peter entered the kitchen.
“How’s it going?” she asked.

“Good. He’s in the bath. I’ll check on him in a bit, but I think he’s all right.” He sat next to her at
the table, and looked over the menus. “Takeout?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know what he’s going to want,” she said.

“He likes Thai food,” said Peter, tapping on the menu for a local place. “And sushi. And pizza with
weird things on it like you like.” He paused. “And wine.”

“That’s a good place to start,” she said. “Maybe we’ll do pizza tonight. I’ll order something you
like and something for Neal and I, and make a salad.”

Peter’s stomach growled. “Apparently Neal isn’t the only one who’s hungry.”

Elizabeth picked up the pizza menu and went to the phone to call in the order. Peter watched her,
one again impressed at how well she was handling this sudden upheaval in their lives. She was
taking charge of dinner, and for Peter, not having to decide on something – after the past few days
– was a huge relief.

Because he felt the tiredness beginning to creep in along with the relief, he stood up. He couldn’t
risk dozing off, not while Neal was still upstairs.

“Hon, I’m going to take Satchmo for a walk,” he said. “I’ll be back in fifteen minutes to check on
Neal.”

She waved a response, phone to her ear, and blew him a kiss.

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_Friday, June 25, 6:20PM_

When the bathroom door closed behind Peter, Neal stood frozen for a minute. He couldn’t quite
believe he was actually here. In Peter Burke’s house. Not in the Justice Facility. Not restrained and
helpless. Not facing certain death.

It was overwhelming. Suddenly, he couldn’t hold any of it back anymore. The tears started flowing
freely. There was no sobbing, just the tears, and they weren’t going to stop anytime soon. Neal
wiped at them furiously, then gave up. Through the blur of tears, he managed to shed the
sweatshirt and track pants and tear off the bandages Peter had applied.

He stumbled to the bathtub and gingerly stepped in. The water burned at his raw skin, but felt so
good otherwise. He lowered himself into the heat, and let out an involuntary groan that he was sure
they could hear across state lines.

He didn’t care.

Neal had been so cold for so long, the water was almost too much. He could feel the heat soaking
through his skin, deep into his bones. Nothing had _ever_ felt this good, or ever would. He’d
eventually grab the soap and start to get clean, but first…

He let his eyes drift closed. He didn’t want to fall asleep and drown, but he could relax for a few
minutes.

It was quiet in the bathroom. In the distance, he could hear movement in the house. Peter and

He wondered how it would go. Where he would sleep. How they would treat him. Would they let him go out, do things? Make contact with his friends? Or would he be locked to Peter or in this house all the time?

It was definitely scary to know someone had so much power over him. He hadn’t really thought about it that way when he was arrested and sentenced in the first place. The Work Contracts were almost the same as being in prison would have been before PIA passed. Not that he knew from experience, but from what he understood. The prison system had become gradually privatized for profit over the years, so the shift to factory and service work from prison as confinement wasn’t a huge one. That was probably why the law had passed so easily; people couldn’t really see a difference, not enough to care.

ESIA was different. Neal hadn’t been thinking about the way it was different when he volunteered to put his Contract up for sale. He had been thinking about getting out of the work camp and going after Kate. Kate, who had promised to wait for him, had visited him weekly at Winters, and then, one day, had said it was over and disappeared. He was desperate to find her, and when Winters announced Contracts were needed, he was one of the first to respond. His theory was that, if he could get out of the work camp and its tight security, he could have a little more freedom of movement on the outside. Maybe he could con his owner into helping him. People liked Neal. They always had. He could use that to his advantage.

Only it hadn’t worked that way. He hadn’t anticipated someone like Carl Friedrich. Had never even imagined the reasons Friedrich had purchased his Contract. Neal sank further down into the warm water, trying not to think about those few weeks he was with Friedrich. If possible, he’d block them out of his memory for good.

And then, when Brian…Neal shook his head. He didn’t want to think about the other inmate, either. But after that, when Friedrich had turned him over to Justice, things had finally sunk in, how serious it all was. He had no control over himself. No control over his fate. There was nothing he could do.

Now, with Peter, it was the same. Peter could do anything. Could change his mind, send him back to the Justice Facility. Could order him to do things he didn’t want to do. Could treat him like property.

But it’s not the same, he reminded himself. Peter was only purchasing his Contract to help him, not to use him. He owed Peter, for saving his life. He wanted to do anything Peter needed, to pay him back, show him it was worth it. That Neal was worth it.

Yet, he couldn’t help the small doubts that insisted on springing up like weeds. Peter did have a use for him. Peter wanted Neal to help close cases. So was it really any different than being owned by someone like Friedrich?

Neal pushed all of his thoughts away and opened his eyes. This was getting him nowhere. He needed to concentrate on the positives: he was out of the Justice Facility. There was no guarantee he wouldn’t be sent back, but at least some of that was in his control. If he caught the Dutchman, if he was useful to the FBI, he could keep himself out long enough for the Forced Sale to go through. Then, he’d reassess and figure out his next move.

The water had become tepid, so Neal pulled the plug. Tentatively, he stood. His legs were shaky, but he thought he could manage to stand long enough to wash off in the shower. It would make him feel better.
He turned on the shower, as hot as he could stand it, and reveled in the way the water ran over his hair and his skin, as if he was shedding the past six weeks of his life. He found some sweet-smelling shampoo, and scrubbed at his scalp and his beard until it hurt. He used the scented bath gel, slicking it over his skin and creating as many suds as he could manage.

It was glorious.

When he was finished, he turned off the water and stepped out, wrapping himself in a fluffy blue towel that smelled like a day at the beach. Then he took a good look in the mirror.

He hardly recognized himself. Under the scraggly beard, his cheeks looked hollow, and there were dark circles under his eyes. He could see his ribs – he’d always been skinny, but this was a new level of emaciated. Amazing what a few weeks of starvation would do.

For a moment, he was overwhelmed again. The edges of his vision went gray, and he grappled with the edge of the counter, losing the battle and sliding to the floor with a thud.

There was a rapid knock on the door. “Neal? You okay?”

Peter’s voice.

“Fine,” Neal said. “Just…taking a break. I’ll be out in a minute.”

“Take your time,” said Peter. “Food will be here soon. Yell if you need anything.”

Neal gave himself another minute, leaning against the cabinets and breathing deeply. He reached up and grabbed the water bottle, downing it all at once. When things cleared – and the room stopped spinning – he pushed himself back to his feet. He felt steady again.

Then he got down to business. The beard went first. Then he brushed his teeth seven times, until his teeth felt like teeth again. He ran the brush through his hair, styling it as best he could. He needed a haircut.

He smiled into the mirror. The sunken cheeks and dark circles were still there, but he looked more like himself. He felt like he might be able to pull off the Caffrey Charm if he put all his energy into it.

Carefully, he tended to the restraint wounds and re-wrapped them himself. It was a little clumsy, but his hands were working mostly right again, so he managed. Next were the clothes: a soft pair of grey pajama pants and a blue t-shirt. They were big; they must be Peter’s. He rolled the pants at the waist so that they wouldn’t fall down. He’d have to figure out what to do about clothes of his own. Maybe he could offer to do something extra for Peter and Elizabeth in exchange for a bit of cash, at least until he figured out a way to access some of his reserves, or get in touch with Mozzie.

When he was done, he straightened up. He pulled the shower curtain closed so it could dry properly, folded the sweatshirt and track pants and laid them on the counter, wiped out the sink. It made him feel more in control.

Taking a deep breath, he opened the door to the bathroom, and stopped short.

Peter was sitting against the wall opposite the door, playing with his phone.

When Neal appeared, Peter looked up and smiled. “Hey,” he said. “You’re looking better.”

Neal nodded. “Feeling better. Were you sitting there waiting for me?” To make sure I didn’t run?
Peter got to his feet. “Needed to make sure my investment wasn’t drowning in the bath. Hungry?”

Waiting to…make sure I was okay? He blinked rapidly. He wasn’t going to lose control again, not now.

Neal sniffed. He could smell…pizza. That was definitely pizza. His mouth watered, and his stomach let out a monstrous groan.

“I think that’s a yes,” he said with a rueful smile.

Peter headed for the stairs, and Neal followed. He was grateful that Peter didn’t offer to help him down the way he had helped him up, but also that he moved slowly, staying right in front of Neal so that, if necessary, Neal could put out a hand to steady himself on Peter’s shoulder.

Being weak totally sucked.

When they reached the first floor, Elizabeth was setting a large salad bowl on the dining table. The table also held two pizza boxes and an open bottle of wine.

Elizabeth looked up, and her eyes widened. “Wow,” she said.

Neal froze. What had he done wrong?

“Please, El, let’s not boost his ego any more than necessary,” said Peter.

Elizabeth laughed. “Sorry, it’s just that you…you’re all cleaned up, and…wow. What a difference. I see why people give you anything you want.”

Neal unfroze and smiled, a genuine smile, not an I’m-trying-to-get-something-out-of-you smile.

“I’m still a mess,” he said. “But I’ll take the compliment. Thank you.”

“In other words, hon, he just told you to wait and see what he can do when he’s not half-starved. Neal, sit.” Peter pulled a chair out for him, and Neal obeyed.

Elizabeth poured the wine into her glass and Peter’s. She looked at him in question, and he nodded. He watched the rich red liquid swirl into his glass and sighed in anticipation.

“Let’s see,” she said. “We’ve got two pizzas here. One has pepperoni and mushrooms, which is Peter’s favorite. The other one, I took a chance and got something I like.” She lifted a lid on one of the boxes. “It’s a white pizza, with spinach and artichoke.”

“That looks great,” he said. He wanted to just reach out and grab a slice, but he waited for her to serve it up.

He was worried they’d want to talk, and wasn’t sure he’d be able to manage conversation. His stomach had begun to ache, and all he could think about was getting that pizza into his mouth. Thankfully, they seemed to sense his need to concentrate. He did the best he could to be civilized, but suspected that he was shoving the food in and guzzling the wine. He realized he had downed four slices and Elizabeth was refilling his wine glass a second time before he slowed down.

“Sorry,” he said. “I’m just—“

“Don’t you dare apologize,” said Elizabeth. “There’s more. Want another slice?”

He shook his head. “Maybe some of the salad, though.”
Now that the intense hunger pangs were past, he felt he could manage to eat with a fork in a dignified manner. He was able to serve himself the salad, and in between bites, he tried some conversation.

“Thank you,” he began. “Both of you. You’re going above and beyond for someone you barely know, and I want you to know how much I appreciate it. I said it to Peter already, but I’ll pay you back. Make it worth it. I swear.”

He saw them exchange a glance. “Neal,” said Peter. “Remember: do not commit crimes to get money to pay us back.”

“I remember,” said Neal. “No crimes.”

“And, just to close up that loophole that’s running through your brain, I do not want you to try to pay me back out of some stash you’ve amassed from previously committed crimes.”

Neal grinned. He had been wondering when Peter would address that gaping hole. But he had other loopholes. “Peter, I promise, none of the money I would offer you would come from crimes that I have committed.”

Peter narrowed his eyes. “Or that someone else has committed or will commit.”

“You’re taking all the fun out of it,” Neal said. “Kidding, kidding.”

“You can pay us back by sticking around. Not taking off. Helping me at the FBI. Catch criminals, like we told the court,” said Peter.

Neal nodded. Of course, that was the use Peter had for him. Maybe it was worth it to his career for Neal to be useful in that way, like paying for training or a degree or something.

“Still,” said Neal. “If there’s anything else you need, just say it.”

“What about ground rules?” asked Elizabeth. “Maybe we should talk about that.”

Neal stilled. Okay, so here was where he found out how things were going to work. This dinner, with the wine, was a nice introduction to the house, but once he was settled, it might change.

Peter nodded. “For right now, we have to be very careful. We’re under tight scrutiny by the Bureau and by the Court. And maybe by Friedrich, as well.”

Neal suppressed a shudder. He hadn’t considered that perhaps Friedrich was going to be spying on them.

“We’ve got to keep everything on the up and up. It has to look perfect from the outside. The Court will be monitoring your movements, as well as how tightly I’m controlling you. Remember, they think you killed the other inmate.”

“I didn’t. I didn’t, it wasn’t—“

“Neal,” said Elizabeth, cutting him short, “we know. But they don’t.”

“Since they are a little concerned about that, I have to look like I’m keeping you reined in, and you have to look like you’re being absolutely obedient.”

“What does that mean? Practically?” asked Neal.
“Practically, it means that when we’re home, your collar is set with the boundaries of our property. As long as you’re in the house or in our yard, you’re fine. When we go out, you’ll be electronically tethered to me. At work, too.”

“Sure,” said Neal. It was better than being confined to one room, like he had been at Friedrich’s. Or his cell.

“Once we get past the Forced Sale and people aren’t watching us so closely…then things can change. You can have more freedom to go out on your own, have some privacy. Until then, just bear with us.” Peter’s gaze was intense. It was almost like Peter was looking right into his mind.

“Peter, I have no intention of fucking this up,” said Neal, honestly. “For either of us. Just tell me what I need to do, and I’ll do it.”

Peter nodded, satisfied. “Good,” he said. “I think those are the rules. Otherwise…just…don’t do anything stupid. Nothing illegal. Don’t reach out to old contacts.”

Neal thought about this a minute. “What if I need to talk to old contacts to help on a case?”

“That’s fine,” said Peter. “I just need to know you’re doing it so we can explain it if asked. Clear it with me ahead of time.”

“Peter, some of these people—“

“I don’t need details or names. I have worked with CIs before, Neal. I know you’ll need to put a leg back into your world to be of real help. But we need to communicate about it.”

Neal tried to imagine how Mozzie would react when he found out that Neal was working with the FBI. He would tell Mozzie, of course. Mozzie would help him out anyway, but he would get an earful.

“Okay, so Rule Number One: Don’t Fuck This Up. Rule Number Two: Don’t Do Anything Stupid. I think I can handle that.”

“Or illegal,” said Peter. “Nothing illegal.”

“Let’s make that part of Rule Number Two,” said Neal. He took the last drink of his wine.

Elizabeth help up the bottle. “More?” she asked. “We’ve kicked these two, but I can open another.”

Two bottles? He realized that there were two empty bottles on the table.

“Better not,” he said. His head was starting to feel fuzzy. He hadn’t had alcohol in years, and drinking three glasses of wine on an empty stomach probably wasn’t the best idea he’d ever had. “In fact, I think I might be ready to sleep again…unless there was something you needed from me tonight.”

Peter shook his head. “Just for you to recover so we can get started on the Dutchman.”

“Right,” said Neal. He tried to shake off the fuzziness. “You mentioned a case file. I can take a look.”

“Not tonight,” said Peter. “We’ll get started first thing tomorrow. My team has worked up a set of leads for us, and you might come up with a new angle.”

“Why don’t you boys head upstairs,” said Elizabeth. “I’ll clean up down here.”
Neal watched as Peter handed her his dinner plate and kissed her. He smiled. He had once imagined that he would have scenes like this with Kate. He still could. Once he found her. He’d get started on that in the morning, too. Somehow. It didn’t fall into the category of Rule Number Two. It certainly wasn’t illegal, and it wasn’t stupid to look for your missing girlfriend. It might fuck things up, but he’d do his best to avoid that.

“Come on, Neal,” said Peter. “I’ll show you where you’ll be sleeping.”

Neal followed Peter up the stairs. Fifteen minutes later, he was lying in the most comfortable bed he had been in in forever, marveling at the difference between how he was feeling now – fed, a little buzzed, warm, comfortable – with how he had felt a handful of hours earlier. It took seconds for him to sink into a contented sleep.
Chapter Summary

Neal has nightmares, and they all struggle with the aftermath.

Chapter Notes

Warnings: This is where things begin to get explicit. If that makes you uncomfortable, you could read the beginning and the end of this chapter, and not lose anything that you couldn't figure out. If you're waiting for it, know that this is a slow-burn fic, and if you can be patient with the plot, I promise it will be worth it.

Chapter Twelve: Rattled

Saturday, June 26, 1:17AM

At the strangled yell, Peter’s eyes flew open. He sat up in bed, blinking into the darkness.

Beside him, Elizabeth, stirred. “What’s going on?” she asked, her voice bleary with sleep.

Peter waited, and within moments, there was another yell.


She mumbled a response, but he had already tossed the covers to the side and was hurrying out of the room and down the hall.

When he got to the door of the guest room, Neal was thrashing on the bed, blankets tangled around him. Peter moved quickly to the bed, reaching out to grip Neal’s shoulder.

“Hey,” he said. “Neal. Wake up.”

Neal yanked his shoulder away with another yell, and rolled all the way off the other side of the bed. He landed with a thud, and Peter winced.

“Neal?” said Peter. “You okay?”

There was a moment of silence, and then Neal said, “Yeah. Fine.”

Peter tried not to smile. It wasn’t really funny, except that it sort of was. Neal sat up, his head appearing on the other side of the bed.

“What…happened?” he asked.

“I think you were dreaming,” said Peter. “And then you rolled off the bed.”
Neal crawled back up onto the bed. “Sorry,” he said. “I’m fine.”

“You sure?” asked Peter.

“I’m sure. Go back to sleep.” Neal wrestled with the blankets until they were back in order, and slid down underneath. “Totally fine.”

Peter nodded. “Okay. Call if you need anything.”

He returned to his bedroom, where Elizabeth was waiting.

“He was dreaming,” said Peter. “He’s okay now.”

She lifted up the covers and he accepted the invitation, sliding in beside her. He breathed in the scent of her hair and skin, and settled back into sleep.

* WC – WC – WC – WC – WC – WC – WC *

_saturday, June 26, 2:42AM_

The second time Peter heard Neal yell, he was moving before he was even really awake.

He stumbled down the hall and to the doorway of Neal’s room. This time, Neal was sitting straight up in bed, staring into the darkness, eyes wide, his breathing fast and heavy.

“Neal?” he asked.

Neal turned his head slightly, but his eyes remained unfocused.

Peter stepped into the room. “Neal, wake up,” he said. He thought maybe the kid was still asleep, and didn’t want him to start sleepwalking.

Neal blinked, and his eyes focused on Peter. “Peter,” he said. “It’s fine. Sorry. I didn’t mean to wake you up.”

Peter relaxed. “No problem,” he said. “Is there something you…that you wanted to talk about?”

Peter cringed a little. He hated these kinds of conversations, but clearly something was bothering the kid.

Neal shook his head. “No, nothing. Sorry,” he said. “I’ll close the door, so that I don’t wake you up again.”

“Seriously, it’s not problem,” said Peter. “I’d be a little worried if you weren’t having nightmares, after what you’ve been through.”

Neal smiled. “I’m fine,” he said.

Peter narrowed his eyes. “Okay,” he said. “Remember, we’re right down the hall.”

* WC – WC – WC – WC – WC – WC – WC *

_saturday, June 26, 4:01AM_

By the time Neal yelled the third time, Peter was over it.

“Should I go?” asked Elizabeth, eyes still closed.
“No,” said Peter with a sigh. “I’ll be back.”

When he got to the guest room, Neal was twisted up in his blankets again, and was struggling to get free, punching out with his arms, and making desperate noises.

Peter moved quickly. He grabbed at Neal to keep him from lashing out, pulling him in close and wrapping his arms tightly around his narrow chest.

“Neal,” he said. “Neal, you’re going to hurt yourself. Wake up.”

After a moment, Neal stopped fighting and relaxed. His breathing evened out.

“Peter?” he asked sleepily.

“Yeah. You good?”

“Yeah. Fine,” said Neal.

Peter released him, and stepped back while Neal untangled the blankets and straightened them out. He looked up at Peter, his eyes shining in the moonlight.

“I’m really sorry,” he said. “Maybe we should knock me out to sleep for a while. God, this is embarrassing.”

Peter smiled. “It’s okay. I think maybe your body is so used to being…bound…that you’re freaking out when you can move in your sleep.”

Neal shook his head. “I’m fine. Do you think…” he trailed off.

“What?”

“Can you stay a minute? Just until I get to sleep?” Neal’s voice sounded small to Peter. Neal took a shaky breath, and then admitted, “After you came to the Justice Facility, that’s how I was able to sleep. Telling myself you were coming back.”

Peter crumbled a little at that. “Sure, kiddo. I can stay.”

Neal pulled the blankets up to his chin and closed his eyes. Peter watched him. After a minute, he opened his eyes again, smiled, then closed them. This repeated several times, until Peter sighed.

He sat on the bed, and rested his hand on Neal’s chest. He could feel the man’s heart beating, and his breath going in and out. Both slowed, until Peter thought Neal had fallen asleep. He took his hand away, and Neal’s eyes flew open.

“You don’t have to stay,” he said. “Never mind, go back to Elizabeth.”

Peter pursed his lips. The kid was no use to him, and they’d never catch the Dutchman, and he’d never get the Forced Sale, if he didn’t get some rest.

He pulled up the edge of the blanket and slid into the bed next to Neal.

“Peter?”

“Shhhh,” said Peter. He shifted so that the line of his body was pressed up against Neal’s. It was a little awkward, but he could feel Neal relaxing against him, so he relaxed as well. “Just go to sleep.”
In a few minutes, Neal was breathing deeply and evenly, and Peter felt himself drifting into slumber as well.

* WC – WC – WC – WC – WC – WC – WC *

**Saturday, June 26, 7:40AM**

Peter breathed in the scent of Elizabeth’s hair and skin. He smiled into El’s hair, and pulled her tighter against him. He loved it when he woke like this, wrapped around her. He nuzzled at the back of her neck, nosing aside a strange hard necklace, planting a kiss, two, on her sleep-warmed skin.

He moved his hand slightly across the skin of her chest, stroking in circles.

But something wasn’t…right.

Her nipples were smaller, tighter, her chest somehow not rounded but flat. He drifted his hand lower, looking for her soft stomach, and instead found the hardness of ribs, abs…

Peter froze, sleep falling away in an instant.

*Oh god,* he thought. *Neal.*

Maybe Neal was still asleep, and he could just pretend this had never happened. He stayed very still, and listened. Neal’s breathing was fast and shallow, his body was tensed under Peter’s palm.

Not asleep, then.

Peter lifted his hand off of Neal’s stomach and carefully rolled away. He heard Neal’s breathing slow by increments.

He cleared his throat. “Sorry,” he said. There was no point pretending, they were both awake. “I was…confused. I think you used El’s shampoo yesterday.”

There was a long pause. Then, “It’s fine.”

Peter rolled his eyes. Neal would always be “fine.” But in this case, he was willing to let it go if Neal was. He glanced at the clock.

“It’s nearly eight,” he said. “I’ll go wake up Elizabeth, meet you downstairs for breakfast in a while?”

“Sure,” said Neal. He still hadn’t moved.

Peter rolled out of bed and left the room as quickly as he could, without looking back. He was sure his face was red. When he returned to his own room, Elizabeth was still asleep, curled up on her side, like Neal had been.

Peter lifted the covers and crawled onto the bed, curling his body around hers.

Better. This was what he had been looking for.

He reached his arm around and pulled her close, and she murmured his name.

“Morning,” he said, into her neck.
“Morning,” she said. He could hear the smile in her voice. She wiggled back against him, and he bit back a moan as she came into contact with his hardened length.

He pulled away and rolled her onto her back, hovering over her. She blinked up at him, and then gasped when he yanked her sleep shirt up and closed his mouth around one of her nipples.

“Peter,” she said. “What about—“

He silenced her with a kiss, and then returned to her breasts, sucking on one and then the other until she was gasping. He slid a hand down her front and into her underpants, finding her clit with his middle finger. She let out a low moan as he circled his finger around her slowly.

When she was completely ready for him, wriggling and gasping beneath his attentions, he yanked her underpants to the side and slid into her with one smooth motion. It was fast and frantic, hands scrambling for purchase and mouths crashing together, until she came and he followed.

He collapsed to the side so he didn’t crush her, breathing hard.

“Good morning,” she said again. “My god…”

“I missed you,” he said in explanation, gathering her close.

“Me too,” she said. “How’s Neal?”

He tried not to stiffen at the question. “He’s good,” said Peter. “Was having trouble getting to sleep, so I stuck around and ended up falling asleep myself. He’s awake, will meet us downstairs.”

“What he must have been through,” she said, softly. “This is going to be tough, isn’t it?” she asked. “For him, and us.”

He nodded. “Yeah. I hadn’t really thought…I guess it hadn’t occurred to me that we weren’t just going to be dealing with physical trauma.”

“Well.” Elizabeth pushed herself up and smiled down at him. “We’ll find a way to work it out.”

He pulled her down for another kiss before she rolled off the bed and into their bathroom.

* WC – WC – WC – WC – WC – WC – WC *

Saturday, June 26, 7:50AM

Neal braced his hands against the counter in the guest bath and screwed his eyes shut. He could hear them, even through the doors. He could hear Peter and Elizabeth moaning. He wondered if they knew; if it even crossed their minds that he could.

He swallowed. He didn’t for a second think Peter had meant to do what he had done. It wasn’t part of anything that they had discussed, and if Peter was anything, he was honest and straightforward. If…sex…had been a part of their deal, Neal was sure Peter would have mentioned it.

Peter probably hadn’t even thought about it as a possibility. Neal wouldn’t have either, before…

It was a simple misunderstanding. The shampoo, like Peter had said.

Neal didn’t want that either. Not even a little bit. Best to just let it go. Ignore it. Pretend it had never happened.
And yet, Neal looked down, at his erection tenting through Peter’s pajama pants, listened to the moaning coming through the closed doors, and felt like the worst person in the world.

He licked his lips. It had been so long. Maybe he could…

He slid a hand into the front of his pants, closed his fingers around his length, and let out a long, audible sigh.

Yes, this was good. He stroked up and down, slowly. He tried not to hear Peter and Elizabeth in the background, but…who was he kidding? He gasped back any sounds he was making, keeping as silent as possible. He could feel it building inside him, the urgency, his heart beating faster…

His mind, without permission, flashed back on Friedrich. Carl Friedrich, leering at him, taunting him, as he unwillingly responded to Friedrich’s games.

Neal let out a yelp, gripped himself hard.

Then Brian, that poor, stupid son of a bitch…all he could see was Brian’s lifeless body, the red slashes from the knife…

And just like that, it was over. In his hand, his cock softened. He tried to redirect his thoughts… to Kate…to Alex…to – even to Peter, who had started all of this – but it was no use.

Neal removed his hand and gripped the counter again. He ground his teeth in frustration.

It had been a while, and it looked like it was going to be a while longer.

He took his time composing himself, stepped into the shower briefly, brushed his teeth.

By the time he was descending the staircase, he had pushed the events of the morning – and his unbidden memories – down as deep as they would go.

Elizabeth was in the kitchen, and when he pushed open the door, she whirled around, her eyes bright.

“Neal,” she said. “Good morning. I hope you like—“

“Bacon,” he said, inhaling deeply. “Everyone likes bacon. Anyone who says they don’t is running a con.”

She laughed. “Good to know. How did you sleep?”

She was watching him carefully, and he schooled his features, wondering what she knew. She probably knew that he had woken up from nightmares several times. That Peter had stayed with him. No use lying about that.

He shrugged. “A little rough,” he said. “But I’m fine.”

She examined him a minute, and then nodded, seeming to accept his statement. She turned back to the pans sizzling on the stove, and he slid onto one of the breakfast stools and watched her work.

She moved gracefully, transferring strips of cooked bacon to a plate lined with paper towels, then pouring some egg mixture into another pan. She sprinkled a handful of diced vegetables over the egg, than bent down to adjust the flame.

Next thing he knew, she was pouring a cup of coffee and setting it in front of him.
“Cream? Sugar?” she asked.

He blinked at her. “Cream,” he heard himself say. She crossed to the refrigerator, pulled out a carton of cream, and dropped it beside his coffee cup before returning to the stove.

He fixed his coffee, taking a moment to savor it. How long had it been since he had had a good cup of coffee? He hadn’t had any at the Justice Facility, obviously. Not with Friedrich. At Winters, the coffee had been weak and bitter.

This was amazing. Some kind of…he sniffed…Italian roast. Freshly ground. He wondered if the coffee was Peter’s thing or Elizabeth’s. He’d find out.

Elizabeth was adding cheese to the pan and folding the eggs, when he started paying attention again.

“Where’s Peter?” he asked.

“Shower,” she said. “He’ll be down shortly.” She pulled out another pan and got a second omelet going. His mouth started to water.

“I can cook,” he said, suddenly.

She shot him a glance over her shoulder. “Can you?”

He nodded. “Yeah. I mean, I thought you should know. That I can cook. I could do that, for you guys, if you wanted.”

She grinned. “I wouldn’t say no,” she said. “Both Peter and I are so busy, sometimes getting dinner – or breakfast – on the table is a challenge.”

Neal sipped his coffee and felt something settle in him. He could cook. It was something he could do, that wasn’t illegal or dangerous or stupid.

Peter pushed open the door to the kitchen. He looked fresh and bright, in soft jeans and a grey t-shirt and white socks, his hair damp from the shower.

He glanced over at Neal, then away, and then back, with determination.

“Morning,” he said. He crossed to Elizabeth and grabbed her, spinning her around for a kiss. She laughed.

“Neal was just telling me he can cook,” she said.

“Like…books? Forged paintings?” asked Peter. He was kidding, Neal could tell from the gleam in his eye.

“Like food,” said Neal. “Gourmet food. I’ll have you know I’ve been trained by some of the best international chefs in the world.”

Peter rolled his eyes. “That, I believe,” he said. He poured himself a cup of coffee and came around to the counter. After a moment’s hesitation, he settled on the stool next to Neal.

Neal’s nerves fluttered with anticipation. What was that about? He shoved it aside.

“How are the injuries?” asked Peter, gesturing at the bandages on Neal’s arms.
“Fine,” said Neal. He had re-bandaged again that morning, and they did seem better.

“Good,” said Peter. “El, what time is the doctor coming?”

“Doctor?” asked Neal.

“Ten,” Elizabeth said. She slid an omelet onto a plate, added a few strips of bacon, and set it in front of Neal. “Peter didn’t want to bring you to the hospital yesterday, but he did want someone to check you out,” she explained.

Neal nodded. “Yeah. Okay, that’s fine.”

“Then we can take a look at the Dutchman file, if you’re up for it,” said Peter.

“Absolutely,” said Neal. “Could I have…would it be possible to have access to a computer too? I tend to think and research fast.”

“Sure,” said Peter. “We’ve got a couple of laptops, and can make that happen.”

Neal picked up his fork and dug into his omelet. While he was researching the Dutchman, he could also send out a beacon to Mozzie and see what he could find about Kate.

It was time to get busy. After he finished his bacon, which, frankly, was from heaven.
Outfitted

Chapter Summary

Neal is checked by the doctor, and they get a lead on the Dutchman case.

Chapter Thirteen: Outfitted

Saturday, June 26, 10:22AM

Peter stood to the side, leaning against the living room bookcase, arms crossed, as Dr. Bell examined Neal.

He had planned to leave them alone; to offer for them to go up to the guest room; to go and do anything else. Instead, he was standing here, watching, as if he was on guard.

It was annoying as hell, but it seemed he was physically incapable of leaving Neal alone with an outsider.

Elizabeth had left shortly before the doctor had arrived, in a blur of perfume and filmy scarves, to attend some event. She had kissed him on the mouth, and Neal on the cheek, and promised to be home before dinner.

Peter bit back a grin at the memory of the look on Neal’s face when she had leaned up to kiss him. The kid had looked like he didn’t know what to make of it, and then like he had been gifted with the most precious thing in the world.

If there was one thing Peter could relate to, it was the way Elizabeth Burke could make a man feel.

Now, the doctor finished his examination, and sat back.

“Well, Neal,” he said. “It may surprise you, but I think you’re in decent shape, considering.” He glanced up at Peter. “I’m going recommend a prescription for an antibiotic, in case there are any issues with those wounds, but it’s not required. Otherwise he’s malnourished and dehydrated, and really just needs some rest, liquids, and some food.”

Neal grinned. “Thanks, doc,” he said. “Hear that, Peter? Rest and food. I’ll take a steak, medium rare, after my nap.”

Peter snorted. “Okay, Heffner,” he said. The doctor glanced between them in surprise.

“Make sure you keep those bandages fresh,” he said to Neal. “After another day or so, try removing them, see how it feels.”

Neal nodded.

The doctor gathered his things, and stood. He addressed Peter. “Could you walk me out?”

“Of course,” Peter said. To Neal, he said, “Stay. I’ll be right back.”
Neal raised his palms, as if to say *where would I go*, and settled back into the sofa.

Peter opened the door and ushered the doctor out onto the stoop. “Thank you for coming out,” he said. “I really appreciate it. I was reluctant to turn him over at a hospital or urgent care center, if he didn’t really need it.”

The doctor nodded. “Certainly,” he said. “Understandable. They can be expensive. My rates are very reasonable for house calls for inmates. I talked it over with your wife.”

Peter frowned. “Send me a bill,” he said.

“Do you want the prescription for the antibiotic?” asked Dr. Bell.

“Why wouldn’t I?” asked Peter.

“Oh, not that you wouldn’t,” stammered the doctor. “Sometimes owners don’t want to spend the money on something that’s only a precaution. Depends on how much time is left on the Contract, things like that. Since he’s new, I’d guess you’ve got a significant investment to protect.”

Peter’s frown deepened. There was that implication again, that Peter was concerned about the expense of Neal’s care. “Look,” he said. “If Caffrey needs the medication, I want him to have it. I don’t care about the Contract or any ‘investment.’”

The doctor blinked, and then smiled. “Good,” he said. “I’ll call in the prescription to the pharmacy on the corner. Listen, if you aren’t concerned about the cost, he could also probably benefit from… talking to someone.”

“Like a therapist?” asked Peter.

Dr. Bell nodded. “Like a therapist. I’ve seen it before; inmates who are confined for a prolonged time, or who suffer from poor treatment, can have a difficult mental recovery. It can impact their usefulness to the owner, so in the long run it’s usually a cost-effective decision.”

“I’ll ask him,” said Peter. “Dr. Bell, thanks again.”

They shook hands, and the doctor descended the steps to the street. Peter watched him go, thinking. The doctor had clearly thought that Peter was a *real* owner – someone who had bought the Work Contract of an inmate and was planning to exercise total control – rather than what he really was.

Which was…what, exactly?

In some senses, he was a real owner. He was planning to pay a substantial sum of money, and exercise control over Caffrey. But that was so that he stayed put and didn’t get into any more trouble. It was for Caffrey’s own good, not for Peter’s benefit.

Though *Peter* was getting a benefit out of this. If Neal could really help him close cases, that would be a benefit to the FBI, to society, and to Peter’s career. In that sense, maybe he *was* buying something of value. An investment.

Peter shook off the thoughts. His primary interest here was in making sure Neal was safe. No one deserved to be in a situation like Neal had been in. He was doing what was right, and things would fall where they may.

He re-entered the house. Neal was sitting on the sofa, just as Peter had left him. He smiled
brilliantly.

“Okay, you hungry?”

Neal shook his head. “I was kidding about the steak, Peter.”

“Thirsty?”

He held up the water bottle El had given him before she left.

Peter crossed to where he had left the Dutchman file, on the sideboard, and brought it over to Neal. He made a decision. He needed to get the antibiotics, he had a few other things to attend to, and it would do him good to get away from Neal for a bit, no matter how much he wanted to keep the kid in his sights.

“Then here you go,” he said, dropping the fat file onto Neal’s lap. “Have a look. I’m going to run a couple of errands, grab your antibiotics, and I’ll be back in a while. Remember, your boundary is the house and yard. Don’t try to leave. Remember Rule Number One and Rule Number Two.”

Neal let out a soft “oof” when the file landed on his lap, but he immediately unwound the string from the spool and opened the folder.

Peter was halfway out the door when Neal spoke.

“Peter?”

“Yeah?” Peter said, turning back to him.

“That computer?”

Peter hesitated a moment, and then pointed up the stairs. “On the bureau next to the bed,” he said. “Create your own user profile. You can’t have my password.”

He heard Neal laughing as he closed the door.

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Saturday, June 26, 10:30AM

Neal sat with the Dutchman file in his lap for two minutes before he moved. He wanted to get started, to prove to Peter that he could help catch this guy. He knew the urgency.

But with Peter gone, having left him alone, with permission to use the computer, Neal could not waste any precious time.

He scooped up the file and made his way up the stairs to Peter and Elizabeth’s bedroom. Pausing at the threshold, he took a moment to look around. Like the rest of the house, it was a nice room. Cool blue walls, high-end furniture, a gorgeous king-sized bed.

Without warning, Neal remembered the sounds he had heard coming from that very bed that morning, and couldn’t help but picture what it must have looked like. Peter and Elizabeth, limbs intertwined. Peter’s hands roaming over Elizabeth’s body, twisting and pulling at her nipples the way Peter had twisted and pulled at Neal’s own…

Neal shook his head, trying to clear it, even as he began to feel himself stir. He cleared his throat.
“Not the time, Caffrey,” he muttered. And Christ, it wasn’t like he was into Peter Burke. It was all circumstantial.

He set the file on the bed and surveyed the room. He would love nothing more than to be able to search it, ferret out Peter Burke’s secrets – Peter was definitely the type to have a safe – but he didn’t know how much time he would have before Peter returned, so he needed to stay on task.

The laptop was on the bureau, as promised. He grabbed it and, after a moment’s hesitation, settled in the middle of the big bed. It was comfortable. If he wasn’t careful, he was likely to give in to the instinct to curl up and sleep, wrapped in the fluffy coverings, since the previous night hadn’t proved to be restful.

Neal flipped open the laptop. He created a profile for himself, as instructed. He’d figure out Peter’s password and snoop around on the thing another time. The desktop was bare, but Neal only needed one thing for now…the Internet browser. He quickly set it up to disguise his movements, then directed it to one of his email services and tapped out a quick message. It was coded, but Mozzie would get it. He just needed the guy to know he was out of the work camp, on a private Contract. Details could come later…though he’d be willing to bet Mozzie knew more than that already.

He did a couple of quick searches, looking for messages or signs from Kate, but found nothing at any of their usual code locations – the classified ads in several local newspapers, their fake profiles on a dating site – so he erased his browser history and the entire profile from the computer, then created a new profile and opened up the browser again. He’d need to actually do some research related to the Dutchman file on it in case Peter checked…and Peter would check, of that Neal had no doubt.

Then he settled in to read through the Dutchman file.

* WC – WC – WC – WC – WC – WC *

**Saturday, June 26, 1:15PM**

Peter had been unable to shake the sense of foreboding that had been hanging over him from the moment he had left the house. He couldn’t really blame himself. After all, less than twenty-four hours earlier, he had dragged Neal Caffrey out of a hellhole, barely patched him up, dealt with his nightmares all night, molested him in the morning, and then left him alone.

Caffrey had said he didn’t plan to run, or screw things up, or do anything stupid. But he was Caffrey. If he could find a way to wiggle out of a tight spot, he would, even if it would be safer and smarter to stay put and rely on someone else for help.

So Peter had hurried as much as he could through his various errands, gave up trying not to be anxious, and was making his way home as rapidly as he could manage in mid-Saturday traffic.

*Please let him still be there,* chanted Peter as he darted around a pedestrian and swung a wide right to avoid hitting a slow-moving bus.

His phone buzzed, and Peter swore under his breath before hitting the “talk” button on his console.

“This is Burke,” he said.

Diana’s voice echoed around him in the car. “Boss, we got a call from JFK. They’ve got a guy who was bringing a load of Snow White storybooks into the country from Spain.”

Peter’s pulse jumped. Their team had decoded a communication to Barcelona suspected to involve
the Dutchman, and it had mentioned Snow White. This could be nothing...or it could be something. He silently cursed the timed and celebrated it; if it was a break in the case, maybe he and Neal could actually crack this thing in time to save the kid’s life. But on the other hand, Neal was still a bit of a mess. Well, there was no help for it.

“Thanks, Diana. I’ll meet you there in an hour,” he said, yanking the wheel to the left and punching the gas to beat a yellow light.

“Bringing Caffrey?” she asked.

“With luck,” he said.

“How’s he doing?”

He shrugged and then remembered she couldn’t see him. “As well as can be expected. See you.”

Finally, Peter pulled onto his street. He found a spot a few houses down, and if he parked a little crooked, it was only because they’d be back out to the car shortly. He was pulling the fruits of his errands out of the trunk when a car sped past at high speed, engine roaring.

Peter glared at the silver sedan as it peeled around the corner. He hadn’t caught a plate, otherwise he would have reported it. This was a nice neighborhood. Kids played here. Still, he made a mental note to watch for misbehaving silver sedans over the next few days.

A minute later, he was unlocking the front door. He stepped inside, looking around the living room. No sign of Neal.

“Neal?” he called. Silence was the only response.

_Damnit, thought Peter. Did he really take off already?_

He deposited his purchases on the dining room table and glanced in the kitchen. No Neal.

He opened the back door, and Satchmo came bounding inside, demanding to be pet. Peter absently ruffled his fur as he looked around the backyard. No Neal.

On the second floor, Peter peeked in the guest bedroom – empty – and the bathroom – empty – and was ready to check the GPS tracking data when he heard a soft noise coming from his bedroom.

He leaned his head in and stopped short.

There, curled up in the middle of his bed, with the Dutchman file and Peter’s computer spread around him, was Neal. He was fast asleep, and he was snoring.

Peter’s first thought was that El was right; Neal did look innocent when he was asleep, moreso now that his beard was shaved. His second thought was to wonder if Neal was cold. He was still wearing pajama pants and no shirt from the doctor’s visit. Peter could see his stomach moving in and out with his breaths, and it pained him to see how concave it got on each exhale. They needed to get the kid more to eat.

His third thought was that he didn’t want to wake Neal up. He knew Neal hadn’t gotten much real sleep the night before, and heaven knew Neal needed the rest.

But they had a job to do, and in the long run, doing the job would be better for Neal.

Unable to resist, Peter picked up the computer, woke it up. It was open to a browser, and it looked
like Neal had been reviewing recent news articles about art forgers. He recognized some of the leads from the Dutchman file. So, Neal had been trying to work the case. He was a little impressed. Some of these connections were hard to see.

He set the computer back on the bureau and turned back to the bed.

“Neal,” he said, softly. “Wake up.”

Neal wriggled slightly, but didn’t wake as easily as the computer had.

“Hey,” said Peter. “We’ve got a lead on the case. Lots to do.”

Still, nothing. He must really be out.

Peter carefully reached out a hand and laid it on Neal’s shoulder. He didn’t want to startle him, the way he had seemed to every time he woke Neal up, but they needed to get moving.

“Neal,” he said again, a little louder.

This time, it worked. Neal opened his eyes slowly. “Hmm?”

“Wake up,” said Peter.

Neal sat up quickly, dislodging some papers. He glanced around the room, blinking wildly. When he spotted Peter, he paled.

“Sorry,” he said. “I came up to use the computer, and I guess the bed…I should have gone to the guest room.”

Peter wanted to smile, but instead he frowned. “Sleeping on the job already?” he asked.

Neal’s face dropped. “Sorry. I didn’t think…I’ll get some coffee next time.”

Peter couldn’t hold back the snicker. Neal’s eyes narrowed, all contrition gone.

“Are you laughing at me?” he asked.

“Yes,” said Peter.

“I’m glad I can provide you with such amusement.” Neal’s voice was dry.

“Neal, you have never failed to amuse me,” said Peter. “Come on. We’ve got to run. We got a hit on the Snow White BOLO.”

Neal began to gather papers and shove them back into the file. “The phrase you deciphered from the communiqué to Barcelona,” he muttered.

“You’ve been getting up to speed. Good.” Peter took the file from Neal, and started out of the room.

“Um, Peter?” asked Neal.

“What?”

“I can’t really go like this,” he said. “Is there something else I could wear?”

Peter smirked. “Come with me.”
Neal watched Peter’s back as he disappeared from the bedroom. He wondered whether that meant Peter had something for him to wear, or they were just going to go as he was? He knew some people liked to humiliate their inmates with their clothing choices, at home and in public. He had seen it for himself with Friedrich. Surely, Peter wouldn’t make him leave in pajama pants and no shirt to investigate the Dutchman.

Of course not.

Neal followed Peter down the stairs and into the dining room. There was a pile of packages in the middle of the table. Peter set the Dutchman file down next to them, and rummaged around until he came up with a small bottle.

He held it up, then tossed it to Neal. “Your antibiotics. Take one now, then morning and night until they’re gone.” Neal waited, but Peter nodded his head toward the kitchen. “Go ahead,” he said.

Neal pushed open the door to the kitchen and quickly grabbed a glass, filled it with water, and downed one of the small pills. He set the bottle on the counter, and returned to the dining room.

When he opened the door, Peter had a pile of clothing spread out on the table.

“I stopped by the thrift store,” he said. “Got a few things. You’ll need more, but this should do for a few days, at least.”

Neal couldn’t quite form a thought for a moment. Peter had gone clothes shopping for him? On the one hand, Oh god, what did he buy? On the other…it gave him a warm feeling in his chest that Peter had even thought of this.

He carefully riffled through the material. There were a couple of shirts and a pair of pants that didn’t look too bad, a pair of jeans that should probably have been left in the late 80s, and…Neal gasped.

He gently pulled a garment out from under the pile, shook it out. It was a suit, and it was gorgeous. Sleek lines, good seams, and…

“This…this is a Devore,” said Neal, eyes wide. He glanced up at Peter. “Peter, how did you find this?”

“It’s a what?” Peter asked. “I just thought it looked like it would fit you. Narrow, like you are. And you’ll need something to wear to Court, when it’s time.”

“How much did it cost?” asked Neal.

“Don’t worry about it. I got it at the thrift store. See? You can find good things on the rack.”

Neal rolled his eyes. “It’s off-the-rack. And this is not off-the-rack. This is custom.”

“So it’ll do?”

Neal nodded vigorously. “It’ll do. Absolutely. Were there more?”

Peter shrugged. “I didn’t notice. We can check back.”

Neal was running his hands over the material, and he couldn’t stop. He hadn’t had clothing like this in…he had never had clothing like this. Just good fakes.
“Thank you,” said Neal. “This is perfect.”

“Then get ready. We’re meeting Diana at the airport soon. Oh, one more thing…” Peter rummaged in another bag, pulled out a cell phone and held it out. “So I can keep track of you.”

Neal took the phone. “The GPS collar not enough for you?”

Peter grabbed his shoulders and pushed him towards the stairs. “Just go get dressed.”

Neal stumbled a little, but then ran up the stairs with a surge of energy. A new suit, a puzzle to solve… he was ready to prove his worth. And buy himself a little time to figure out a way out of this mess for good.
Near Miss

Chapter Summary

Neal and Peter get their first breakthrough on the Dutchman case, and then Neal has a harrowing experience.

Chapter Fourteen: Near Miss

Saturday, June 26, 4:10PM

Peter was frowning. He was trying desperately to maintain his frown.

It wasn’t meant to be a frown, exactly, just a look of concentration. But if he didn’t focus on frowning, he was worried he would burst into a grin that would make him look like a clown.

That was because Neal was thinking again.

Watching Neal think was quickly becoming Peter’s favorite pastime. He loved the way his blue eyes darkened a couple of shades, the little wrinkle between his eyebrows, the way his tongue peeked out from between his lips.

He loved watching it so much because he knew that whatever came out of Neal’s mouth – when he was done thinking – would delight and surprise Peter. It would send a chill down Peter’s spine, as his heart sped up and he realized they had a lead, a plan, an idea.

An hour and a half earlier, he had unleashed Neal on a pile of old children’s books seized by Customs at JFK International Airport. It all had Peter scratching his head; what did a dead rare book dealer, the definitely not-rare copies of a Spanish version of Snow White, and a killer lawyer have to do with the Dutchman?

After making cute humming noises and poking at the books, Neal had grinned a triumphant grin. It wasn’t the books themselves that the Dutchman was after, it was a sheet of blank paper in the book – a specific type of blank paper, from a specific region and time – that the counterfeiter needed. An appointment card in the rare book dealer’s wallet had led them to the National Archives, opened special at the request of the FBI.

The archivist had brought out a sheet of paper that he proudly said was a “Spanish Victory Bond.” The man had explained its history – supposedly entire boxes of them had been lost and never redeemed. Neal had been impressed at the history, and at the fact that the artwork on the bond was a Goya.

Neal was leaning close to the parchment, his nose nearly touching the paper. He swiped lightly at it with his gloved hand.

“This is the only surviving copy,” said the archivist.

Neal glanced up at Peter, and then looked at the archivist. Here it comes, Peter thought.

“Except…it’s a forgery,” said Neal.
“What?” asked Peter.

“It’s the ink,” explained Neal. “This is an iron-gal dye mixed to match the period colors. But it hasn’t dried yet. You can still smell the gum arabic.”

Peter leaned in to sniff. He wasn’t sure what he could smell, but Neal seemed certain.

“No, no,” said the archivist. “That’s not possible. That’s been here since 1952.”

“It’s been here a week,” said Neal, firmly.

Peter rocked back on his heels and let the grin out.

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Saturday, June 26, 4:40PM

Neal exited the National Archives behind Peter. He was feeling proud of himself, and a little relieved. He knew how to do this. He could be useful, prove his value.

He was also feeling a little…lightheaded. He hadn’t eaten lunch, he realized. His stomach hadn’t yet figured out how to adjust to eating more, and so after the sizable breakfast, his body hadn’t told him it was hungry again. That didn’t mean he didn’t need to eat. He was also still tired.

“You’re starting to earn your keep,” said Peter, waiting for Neal to catch up. They detoured around a pedestrian who was standing in the middle of the sidewalk, head buried in his phone, and moved down the sidewalk, side by side.

Neal shot Peter a cocky smile. “Peter, did you doubt me?”

“If I had, you wouldn’t be here,” said Peter.

Neal blinked a little at that. It was more direct of a compliment than Peter had ever given him.

“Where to now?” he asked.

“The office. I told Diana and Jones to meet us there. We’ll put our heads together, tell them what we learned about the Victory Bonds, and try to figure out exactly what this guy is doing.”

Ask him for something to eat, Caffrey, thought Neal. But he couldn’t. Peter was so fired up about the case, he would be annoyed by the delay, or distraction. Neal could wait until they got home.

“The real question is, who is this guy, and where is he?” asked Peter. Neal didn’t respond, since Peter was more thinking out loud than asking him. “We’ve looked at known counterfeiters, and nothing matches the profile. Come on, car is this way.” Peter waved his hand towards the garage across the street.

“Maybe we’ve been looking at the wrong—“ Neal turned toward the curb, and suddenly, stars swam in front of his eyes. He stumbled.

“Woah.” Peter reached out and grabbed Neal’s arm, steadying him. He looked down at the ground. “What, did you trip on something?”

“Must have,” said Neal. Peter let go, and Neal swayed on his feet. He took a step backwards and off the curb, into the street.
“Neal,” said Peter, sharply, grabbing at his arm again. “What’s wrong?”

Neal shook his head, took a deep breath. The stars disappeared.

“I’m fine,” he said.

“Stop saying you’re fine,” said Peter. “If something’s not okay, you’ve gotta tell me.”

Just what he needed, Peter continuing to see him as helpless. He wanted Peter to see him as a valuable partner, not as a liability.

“I said, I’m fine.” Neal wrenched his arm out of Peter’s grip, and whirled, taking a step into the street.

There was the roar of an engine and the squealing of tires. A flash of silver.

Then something yanked the back of his jacket, and Peter’s arm was a band of steel across his chest, hauling him backwards and up onto the sidewalk. They tumbled toward the ground.

Neal landed first, half on his side, and Peter landed on top of him. All of the air rushed out of Neal’s lungs in a whoosh, and he screwed his eyes shut, gasping for breath.

There was more squealing, more roaring, and then it was over.

Peter rolled off of Neal and immediately grabbed at him. His hands were on Neal’s chest, his head, his thighs…anywhere they could reach.

“Neal! Neal,” said Peter, urgently. “Neal, are you okay? Talk to me.”

Neal opened his eyes. Peter’s face was inches from his, eyes scanning Neal wildly.

“Ow,” Neal said, then let out a groan.

“What? What’s wrong?” The hands were roaming again. One gripped at Neal’s knee and squeezed the bandage over his raw skin.

“Peter,” he said desperately. “That’s my – your hand –“

Peter jerked his hand off Neal’s knee, but then resettled it on his thigh. It slid higher. Neal tried to ignore it, but it was hard, especially when Peter began to gently stroke his thigh in what he probably thought was a reassuring gesture.

“I’m okay, I’m okay,” he said frantically. “I swear.”

“Did you hit your head?”

“No. Can you – can you get off? I can’t…”

Peter backed up, and rolled to his feet. He offered Neal a hand and pulled Neal up beside him. Neal began brushing at his pants and jacket.

“Is it okay?” he asked. “I can’t see the back. Is it torn or scuffed?”

Peter rolled his eyes. “You nearly get hit by a car, and you’re worried about your damned suit. Christ, Caffrey, get some priorities.” But he looked relieved, as if hearing Neal complain about his suit meant Neal really was okay.
Neal straightened the jacket, and then the rest of what Peter had said registered. “I’m sorry, nearly get hit by a what?” he asked.

Peter eyed him. “Why do you think I yanked you out of the street?” He looked around. “It’s long gone. Maybe someone caught a plate. Or one of the cameras did.”

He pulled out his phone. Neal listened with one ear as he talked to an agent, requested the agent pull security footage from any camera on their block and intersection.

Neal thought for a second. He remembered the roaring engine, the flash of silver, the squealing tires. He swallowed, hard, his breathing shallow.

Peter hung up, and eyed him. “You sure you’re okay?”

“Damn,” he said, the wonder evident in his voice. “I nearly got hit by a car. And you saved me.”

Peter smiled. “Yeah, well, don’t go all hero-worship on me. Just protecting my investment,” he said.

“You saved me. Again,” said Neal. Stars started swimming on the edges of his vision once more. He closed his eyes, but the stars remained. He could feel his pulse increasing.

“Neal?”

What was it Peter had said? *If something’s not okay, you’ve gotta tell me.*

“Peter, I think I need to sit down,” he said.

“Okay,” said Peter. He stepped to Neal’s side, took his arm. “Lean on me a minute.”

Neal gratefully followed the instructions, taking comfort in the solid form at his side. Peter was there, so it would be fine.

“Walk with me,” said Peter. “Right foot, now left, good.”

Neal let Peter guide him. His eyes were open, but his vision was blurry. His stomach rolled with nausea. Instead of struggling, he gave up the reins and just listened to Peter’s voice, responded to his movement. A few minutes later, Peter deposited Neal in a plastic chair.

Neal blinked around him. They were in a café.

“Stay here,” said Peter. “I’ll be right back.”

Peter moved away. Neal couldn’t have moved if his life depended on it. Well, maybe then. But for nothing less. He leaned forward, resting his elbows on his thighs and hung his head in his hands until his heart rate evened out and his stomach started to feel more stable. Then he sat up, and Peter was back.

“Here,” he said. “Drink this.”

Peter pressed an open water bottle into Neal’s hands, closing them around the plastic. He kept his hands around Neal’s, and guided the bottle up to his lips. The water was cool and felt good. When had he gotten so thirsty?

Right. He was dehydrated. He probably should have been guzzling water all day.
“Good,” said Peter. “Now this.” Peter handed him an open PowerBar.

Neal didn’t think about the fact that he hated PowerBars. He just took a bite, and then another. By the time he had finished, his head felt clearer, his breathing was steady, and his stomach was growling.

He smirked. “I think we’ve awoken the beast.”

Peter was glaring at him.

“What?” Neal asked.

“Neal, when was the last time you ate?”

“I think…breakfast,” he said.

Peter shook his head. “Damn it.”

“I’m sorry,” said Neal. “I sort of didn’t think about it. I’m not used to eating frequently, and I was excited to be working on the case—“

“It’s not your fault,” said Peter. “I should have been paying more attention.” He sighed. “Can you walk? I want to get you home.”

“I can walk,” said Neal. “I’ll be okay. I thought we were going to the office?”

“That was before you nearly got turned into roadkill and then practically fainted on the sidewalk,” said Peter.

Neal felt himself panicking. He had to be useful. He couldn’t let Peter go off and solve the case by himself.

“I’m really okay now,” said Neal. “I want to be there. I want to—“

“Relax,” said Peter. “You still want to work, we can work. At home. With dinner and comfortable clothes. I’m thinking Chinese food, what do you say?”

“What about Jones and Diana?” asked Neal suspiciously.

“If they want in on the fun, they can come over too. We’ll get extra moo shu pork.”

Neal stared at his hands a moment, then grinned up at Peter. “Dibs on the spring rolls,” he said.
The Dark

Chapter Summary

The get a break in the case, Neal gets a different kind of break, and Peter pursues his own agenda.

Chapter Fifteen: The Dark

Saturday, June 26, 6:40PM

The scene was almost too normal, and at the same time, it was the most bizarre thing Neal had ever seen.

He, Peter, and Elizabeth were sitting on the sofa in the Burkes’ living room. Jones and Diana were in armchairs. The coffee table was filled with Chinese takeout cartons and empty plates.

“Anyone want the last fortune cookie? No? Then I call it,” Jones said, already breaking into the wrapper.

“There’s still some of this…this,” said Elizabeth, picking up a takeout carton and sniffing it. “What is this?”

“That’s my sesame tofu,” said Diana. “Give it here, I’ll finish it.”

“I never pictured you a tofu person,” said Jones. “You seem more like—“

“Be very careful what you say, Jones.” Peter wiped his hands on a napkin.

Diana rolled her eyes. “I’m not a tofu person,” she said. “Christie is trying to make me eat healthy.”

Jones peered into the container. “I’m not sure this is healthy,” he said. “Looks like just as much sugar and salt as—“

“Shut up,” said Diana. She took the last few bites of the fried, sauce-coated tofu, and then spoke with her mouth full. “I can choke it down this way and tell her I had tofu for dinner.”

“What about you, Neal?” asked Elizabeth. “Are you a tofu person?”

He wrinkled his nose. “Depends,” he said.

“What?!” asked Peter.

“What it would get me if I pretended to be,” He shot a grin around the room.

Elizabeth let out a surprised giggle. Diana turned to Peter and said, “And you let this guy roam freely around your house?” Neal stiffened for a moment, until he realized she was smiling, too.

Peter leaned over and lightly cuffed Neal on the back of the head.
“If he’s telling us his secrets, we let him keep talking,” Peter explained.

Neal settled back on the sofa. Never in a million years would he have dreamed – never, but especially not anytime in the last few weeks – that he would be sitting here, in the middle of three federal agents and the wife of a federal agent, having a meal, laughing, *without being in the middle of a con.*

It was truly bizarre.

When he and Peter had returned from the National Archives after his near miss with the silver car, Elizabeth had been waiting for them. She hustled Neal upstairs to change, and then back downstairs and onto the corner of the sofa, blankets piled around him and a bottle of water in his hand.

Jones and Diana had arrived, and they had begun to discuss the case. When the Chinese food had arrived, Neal had tried to explain that he was fine, and could eat at the table, but Elizabeth had refused to let him move. So here they were, acting like normal people who were friends…and not a conman/forger and a bunch of enemy federal agents.

Yeah. Bizarre.

Elizabeth stood and began to gather empty plates and cartons. Neal pushed aside the blanket that was tucked around his lap and stood.

“Elizabeth, let me help you with that,” he said.

Jones and Peter both shot to their feet, murmuring their offers as well.

Elizabeth held up a hand. “Stop,” she said. She pointed at Neal. “You, sit.”

Her tone was so commanding, he felt his body obeying before he had even made a conscious decision to do so. She nodded her approval.

“Don’t you dare move until either Peter or I give you permission. And you two,” she turned her attention to her husband and his second, “let me take care of it. I believe you were in the middle of cracking a case that’s important to everyone in this room.”

“Thanks, hon,” said Peter. “You’re sure?”

“I’m sure.” She came around the coffee table and kissed his cheek on her way to the kitchen.

Peter and Jones settled back down, Peter gazing after his wife fondly, and then turned to his team.

“Okay,” he said. “Where were we before food happened?”

Jones nodded in Neal’s direction. “Caffrey’s head math was putting my calculator skills to shame.”

“Right,” said Peter. “We had figured out that the Dutchman stood to make how much on this counterfeiting scheme?”

“A hundred and fifty million, give or take,” said Neal. “With the bond never expiring and all.”

“That still doesn’t tell us why he would go to the trouble to swap out the real bond at the Archives with a forgery,” murmured Peter.

They sat in silence a moment. Neal thought. If he were the Dutchman, if *he* were forging the bonds, why would *he* replace the original with one of his copies? Sacrifice $248 thousand?
Suddenly, he smiled. Peter noticed.

“What?” Peter asked, his gaze keen.

“So let’s say this guy comes out of the woodwork, claims he found boxes of these bonds,” said Neal, speaking slowly, savoring every word on his tongue. He was going to enjoy this.

“Says he found them in those caves, in Spain,” supplied Peter. Their eyes were locked, the rest of the room fading away.

“Yeah. How would they be authenticated?”

Peter frowned. “Well, they’d be taken to the Archives, and…” his frown turned to a satisfied smirk as realization dawned. “And compared with the original.”

“Which he’s already switched out with one of his own.”

“So of course they’d match. Neal, this is good. This is really, really good.”

At Peter’s words, Neal felt heat rising to his cheeks. He tried to control it, but all he could feel was a wash of pleasure.

Peter stood and began pacing the room. “Now we know what his plan is. Next step, we have to figure out where he is and when he’s planning to execute it.”

“Boss, he could be underway already,” Diana pointed out. “After all, we know that there were prior shipments of the same books.”

Peter rubbed a hand over his forehead. “That’s what worries me.” He glanced at Neal, and Neal understood. They needed to catch this guy, needed a win on this, or Neal’s situation looked bleak. Neal tried to smile reassuringly, but he was fairly certain it came out more like a grimace.

They talked for a while, testing out possible avenues of investigation, until Elizabeth came back into the room, drying her hands on a dishtowel. “Major breakthroughs?” she asked.

“Actually,” said Peter, “yes. But now we’re at a dead end.”

“Maybe you should sleep on it,” she said. “It’s been a long day.” She glanced at Neal meaningfully, and then back to Peter. He nodded in understanding.

“My wife is, as usual, the smartest person in the room,” he said. “Let’s call it a night. Keep thinking, and we’ll connect as soon as we come up with something. Come on, I’ll walk you two out.”

Jones and Diana gathered their things, said goodnight to Neal and Elizabeth, and followed Peter out the front door onto the stoop. He closed the door behind them.

Neal watched him go. He knew he was doing a good job. He knew he was providing a benefit to Peter, and the FBI.

So…what was Peter talking to them about, that Neal couldn’t hear?

Elizabeth went into the kitchen and returned once more, this time with a glass of wine, a glass of water, and his antibiotic. She handed him the water and the antibiotic, and gestured apologetically at her wine.
“Sorry,” she said. “No alcohol—“

“With the pills,” he finished. “It’s fine.”

She settled on the sofa beside him. “I thought I’d put on a stupid movie,” she said. “You in?”

He looked at her, sitting there. Her legs were tucked up under her, her wine cradled in one hand, the other casually laid on the back of the sofa, extended toward him.

He couldn’t believe his good fortune. He had known that, beyond being brilliant and determined, Peter Burke was a decent man, who believed in doing what was right. He figured, even though he didn’t have any real basis for it, that Peter would help out someone in need. But he had no idea that Peter would go to such incredible lengths to help someone like him. And he certainly had no idea that Burke’s wife could be so open and kind without hesitation.

After all, like Diana had implied – even though she played it as a joke – he couldn’t be trusted. It didn’t matter that he had neither the energy nor resources to do anything underhanded at the moment. He also had no intention of trying.

He wasn’t running a con. But he could. He could play the dedicated, worshipping slave until they fully trusted him, and then he could take advantage of that. Everything about his past, everything the Burkes knew about him, suggested that he would. He couldn’t himself swear that, somewhere down the line when he felt more secure, he wouldn’t. He always had.

Yet, they seemed to be going out of their way to make him feel comfortable.

Maybe they were conning him.

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Saturday, June 26, 7:30PM

Peter glanced over his shoulder at the windows into his living room, and lowered his voice.

“Listen,” he said to Jones and Diana. “I need a couple of things from the two of you, and I need it to be between us. Low profile.”

“Sure, Boss,” said Diana.

“Why the low profile?” asked Jones.

Peter held back a smile. He loved Diana’s unwavering loyalty and trust, and he equally loved Jones’s measured caution. Damn, he had a good team. Add in Elizabeth for her outsider’s view and Neal’s…Neal, and they could be unstoppable.

“Because it’s not strictly case-related, though it may have an impact on the case,” said Peter. “Until I know more, I need to be careful.”

Jones nodded. “What do you need?”

“First, this afternoon, I asked Jon Sawyer to pull security cam footage from the corner Neal and I were on today when he nearly got hit. Can one of you follow up with him, see what you can find?”

Diana nodded. “Will do. We looking for the driver?”

“Maybe,” said Peter. “I want to see footage of what happened, check on the owner if we can get a
plate, and then…we’ll see if we need to dig deeper.”

As soon as he had gotten over the shock of yanking Neal out of the path of the speeding car, he had had a disturbing thought. He remembered the silver sedan that had sped past him earlier in the day. It could be a coincidence that both cars had been silver, and he hadn’t gotten a good look at the second to be able to tell if it was even the right type of car. But if it wasn’t a coincidence…he wasn’t ready to think through the implications of that. Better to get a look at the footage, see if they could find the driver, and then…see.

“Is there a ‘second’ thing?” asked Jones.

“There is,” said Peter. “And it’s important that this be done off the books. I want to find out what happened with the murdered inmate and Neal and Friedrich. Who was the inmate? How long had he been with Friedrich? For what charges was he paying a debt? Hughes got me Friedrich’s statement about the events, and it isn’t terribly detailed.”

“That’s a tall order, Peter,” said Jones, concern evident in his voice. “Since it’s a property offense, there won’t be much to go on, and I assume you don’t want us filing for warrants to search the estate or running a wiretap.”

“Definitely not,” said Peter. “Just poke at it carefully, see what you can dig up without directly involving Friedrich or letting him know you’re looking.”

“Are you thinking you can get Caffrey free of the additional time on his Contract if you can prove he didn’t murder the inmate?” asked Diana.

“Maybe,” said Peter, though the thought honestly hadn’t occurred to him. In fact, the idea of Neal getting free of his Contract early made him…unsettled. He shook off the thought. “Maybe not. But either way, it would be a good thing if we could prove that.”

Jones nodded. “Friedrich is required by law to provide justification for his selected Justice,” he said. “So it stands to reason that if his justification is the murder of the inmate and it isn’t true, that justification is invalid and so is the selected Justice. You want to at least ensure that Caffrey can’t be killed if you can’t force the sale.”

“That hasn’t been tested,” says Diana. “In theory, you’re right. But since the law is so new, there haven’t been any cases yet, and the political climate is uncertain. It would highly depend on the judge.”

“Then let’s hope we get a judge who hates ESIA,” said Peter. “Or likes Neal.”

“Speaking of judges who like Neal,” said Diana, “do you know when you’re due in Court next?”

Peter shook his head. “I don’t,” he said. “The judge set the initial two-party hearing on Neal’s interim release for next Friday, but Beechwood said she suspected Friedrich would seek to have it moved up. We should expect to be back at any time.”

“You going to tell him?” asked Jones, glancing at the windows.

“I’m not sure I should,” said Peter. “He hasn’t asked about it, and I don’t want to distract him from the case. We need him on his A-game.”

“Peter, for what it’s worth, I’d want to know.”

Peter clapped the younger man on the shoulder. “I appreciate that, Jones. For now let’s not waste
any time. We need to start stockpiling ammunition for whenever it does happen.”

“We got it, Boss,” said Diana. She glanced at Jones. “You up for a late night pow-wow? My place has ice cream.”

“My place has bourbon,” said Jones.

“Guys, I didn’t mean you had to get on this right this second,” protested Peter.

“What better second? Besides, Jones has bourbon.”

They made their way down the steps. Peter watched them go with a fierce sense of pride. Yeah, he had an amazing team.

When he opened the front door and re-entered his house, he stopped and stared. El was curled up on the sofa, laughing. Neal was gesturing comically at the television, which was playing a sappy romantic comedy. He couldn’t identify the feeling that was settling in his chest, so he settled with thinking, once again, about how he had an amazing team.

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Saturday, June 26, 11:30PM

Elizabeth turned off the television with a huge yawn.

“Okay, boys, it’s time for me to turn into a pumpkin,” she said.

“Time for bed?” asked Peter.

“Definitely. I’ll see you upstairs in a bit.” She gave Peter a peck on the mouth, then stood, stretching. “And I’ll see you in the morning,” she told Neal, dropping a kiss on the top of his head.

Neal tried to control his blush, and he thought he might have been moderately successful. “Good night,” he said. “Thanks for the movie.”

She waved over her shoulder and headed up the stairs.

Neal glanced at Peter. He seemed to be thinking about something. Neal waited. Whatever it was, Peter wasn’t going to reveal it until he was ready.

“We should sleep, too,” he said, finally. He stood. “But…there’s something I’d like to talk to you about first.”

“Sure,” said Neal, ignoring the little spark of anxiety that lit in his stomach.

“Tell you what, if you can hang out for a bit, let me go up and get El settled, and then I’ll come back down.”

Neal nodded, and Peter, seeming satisfied, bounded up the stairs after his wife.

Neal sat in the silence for a while, wondering what Peter could want to discuss. The case? The incident with the car? The…weirdness of that morning?

He was distracted from his wonderings by a rapid flash of light that seemed to be coming from the backyard. He leaned forward, watching. There it was again, this time two flashes.
Neal pushed his blanket to the side and rose, keeping his eyes on the windows.

Three flashes.

With a glance upstairs, he quickly moved to the back door, silently opened it, and slid outside. There were probably patio lights, but he left them off, turned one of the dining chairs out towards the backyard, and sat.

“Moz?” he called, softly.

“I watched the best minds of my generation get run down by the drunken taxi cab of absolute reality.” The voice came out of the deepest shadows of the yard.

Neal smiled. “I should have known that the next time we met, you’d be sitting in the dark, misquoting Ginsberg.”

“The light’s how they find you, man.”

Neal leaned forward. If he squinted, he could just make out a short figure, the light from the house faintly reflecting off of his glasses.

“Thanks for coming,” he said. “You got my message?”


Neal self-consciously reached up to touch his inmate collar. “Yeah. I don’t suppose you can pick it?”

“No way. If I could, would you run?”

Neal glanced over his shoulder at the house. “Maybe,” he said. “It sort of depends.”

“On?”

“On how bad it looks.”

Mozzie snorted. “I can tell you, it already looks bad. Rumor is, you’re on the hook for a long time.”

Neal shook his head. “That’s not the bad. That I can handle. It’s the threat of the guillotine that I’m worried about.”

“So the Suit is really buying your Contract?”

“Looks like. If they let him.”

“And if they don’t?”

Neal ran a hand through his hair. “That’s the guillotine, Moz. Keep up. Where is she?”

“Kate?”

“Yes, Kate.”

Mozzie sighed. “She’s a ghost, man. She did an outstanding job of melting away.”

Neal gave a frustrated grunt. “Well, keep looking. Hey, listen. You hear anything about a forger
who’s into counterfeiting bonds?”

“Besides you?”

“Besides me,” said Neal, rolling his eyes. “What about Goyas? Who’s forging Goyas these days?”

“Don’t know, man. I gotta go. Your Suit is coming back.”

“If you hear anything, get in touch, okay? This is kind of important.” Neal stood from the chair.

From a distance, he heard: “You know what I always thought was a shame about art forgery? You can’t take credit for your work.”

A smile spread across Neal’s face. It was a long shot, but…that Goya was a masterpiece, and he knew from experience that Mozzie was absolutely right.

He turned back to the house, and slipped inside, locking the door behind him.

Peter was standing in the living room, watching him. “Neal?” he asked, his voice measured. “Taking a stroll?”

Neal ducked his head. “I needed a minute,” he said.

“In the dark? Outside?”

“What, you’ve never gone out to your patio to think? It’s a nice space, you should try it sometime.” Neal walked by Peter to the sofa, picked up the blanket, and began to fold it.

“Neal…”

He turned back to Peter, willing his eyes to convey his exhaustion. “Peter, it’s been a long day. Constant company. Nearly getting mowed down on the street. Being treated like…” he trailed off, knowing he had been about to reveal too much. “I just needed a second to myself, in the dark.”

Peter blinked. Neal realized that he was probably remembering what Neal had said about the relentless light at the Justice Facility, at never being able to retreat.

Then Peter smiled and relaxed. “Sorry. Didn’t mean to interrogate you. But I did want to talk. Still up for it? It won’t take long.”

Neal nodded. Peter chose the dining room, pulling out a chair, and Neal followed suit.

“I didn’t want to bring this up yesterday,” Peter began. He looked like he didn’t want to bring it up now, either. “But I thought we should talk about the next steps of your case. Not the Dutchman. You.”

“Oh.” Neal tensed.

He realized he had been almost successfully avoiding thinking about it. He had been so relieved yesterday when Peter had said that the judge had agreed to allow him out on a trial basis, and seemed to think that Peter would be able to buy the Contract. He hadn’t really let himself return to thinking about the other options at length, until Mozzie had asked if he would run. He would, he realized, if it looked like he was going to be taken back in. He couldn’t let that happen.

“At the hearing yesterday, the judge ordered your trial release. But it can be contested. Since Friedrich wasn’t present, he has an opportunity to be heard on the temporary release itself. The
“Judge set the hearing for next Friday.”

“A week is pretty good,” said Neal. “Maybe we can even bring down the Dutchman in a week.”

Peter nodded. “Maybe. We’ve certainly made more progress today than I thought possible. But there’s a chance – a good one – that Friedrich will ask to have the hearing moved up. It could really be at any time.”

Neal swallowed, and concentrated on breathing. “What would change?” he asked.

Peter shrugged. “I don’t know. Maybe nothing. Certainly, things have only gone in your favor so far. Breaks in the case, you haven’t tried to escape or anything stupid like that. But Friedrich may surprise us.”

“Okay,” said Neal. He forced his shoulders, which had begun to hunch up around his ears, to relax. “Well, there’s no point worrying about it until it happens, right?”

“I think you’re right. Still, it would help if we could use the opportunity to tell the Court your side of the story.”

“My side…of the story about the murder,” Neal realized. “Yeah. I’ll make sure I’m prepared for that.”

Peter leaned forward. “What would really help would be if you could tell me what happened. Maybe I could find a witness, some evidence.”

“To clear me?” asked Neal, unable to keep the bitterness out of his voice. “I doubt that. Friedrich wants me on the hook for it, you’re not going to find anything besides me to contradict his testimony.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure. I’m a pretty good detective,” said Peter.

They stared at each other. Seeming to realize that Neal had no intention of talking more about the incident that night, Peter sighed.

“At least think about talking to me about it,” he said. “If you’re innocent—“

“If I’m innocent?” asked Neal. His stomach clenched. “I thought you believed me.”

“I do,” said Peter. “It was just…my phrasing. Forget it. You should get to bed.”

“You too,” said Neal.

“You going to be all right tonight?”

Neal blinked at Peter. He wasn’t sure he’d be able to sleep without nightmares. Doubted it, actually. But no way was he going to ask Peter to stay again. Peter might misinterpret it, think he wanted…

He shifted in his seat, a twinge of arousal at the thought. Nope, it was just some weird vestiges of his confinement. He didn’t have any interest in Peter like that.

“I’ll be fine,” he said. “And if I’m not…don’t worry about it. I’ll survive.”

Peter watched him carefully. After a moment, he said. “Good. If you do need anything…“
“I’ll let you know, Peter,” said Neal. “I promise.”
Chapter Summary

Neal has another bad night, but then offers up a lead.

Chapter Sixteen: Proof

Sunday, June 27, 1:12AM

Peter stood outside of Neal’s room, listening to him struggle and torn between entering the room and going back to bed.

When he had heard the first sounds of distress, Peter had immediately headed for Neal, without giving it a second thought. But by the time he had reached the guest room door, it seemed to have subsided, which made him pause. After a minute, it started again.

In the moonlight that crept in around the edges of the window shade, Peter could just make out Neal’s form on the bed. He was on his side, facing away from the door, and he was rocking back and forth, letting out small, seemingly fearful – or maybe painful – cries. It would go on for a minute, and then stop, and then start up again, as though Neal’s psyche was letting him take short breaks between rounds.

Still, it was minimal. Neal wasn’t thrashing, the way he had the night before, or yelling. Peter wasn’t sure he should interfere.

On the one hand, Neal had said not to worry about it, that even if he had a bad night, he’d be fine.

On the other hand, Neal always said he was fine, and he was always lying.

On the one hand, Neal needed to get past what was bothering him. He didn’t want to talk about it, didn’t seem to want Peter’s help. Maybe if Peter let him be, let him work through it on his own, he’d be able to deal with it more quickly.

On the other hand, what if Neal needed him, and was just too proud, or in too deep, to say it? Then, the right thing to do would be to ignore his protests and just…help.

He was still standing, paralyzed with indecision, when he heard the thing that made him spring into action.

“Peter…”

Neal said it with such desperation, as a plea, and Peter was helpless against it. He was through the door and by the side of the bed in the space of a breath, his hand on Neal’s shoulder.

“I’m here, Neal,” he said, quietly.

Underneath Peter’s palm, the muscles in Neal’s arm went rigid, and he seemed to stop breathing. Peter squeezed lightly, and Neal jerked his shoulder forward, out of Peter’s grasp. Peter grabbed hold again, this time giving Neal’s arm a firm stroke.
“It’s okay,” he said. “You’re okay.”

“Peter?” asked Neal.

“Yeah. More nightmares?”

Neal relaxed, though it seemed almost deliberate to Peter, as though Neal was consciously making his muscles unclench bit by bit. He twisted his head slightly on the pillow and peered up at Peter.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “Did I wake you up again?”

Peter smiled, and sat down on the side of the bed. “Don’t worry about it,” he said. “Want to talk about it?”

Neal snorted a laugh. “Definitely not,” he said. He pulled the blankets higher around him, and faced the opposite wall once more. “I’m fine. You should invest in earplugs so you get a good night’s sleep.”

Peter looked down at his odd houseguest. There it was again, Neal telling Peter he was fine when he wasn’t. He knew the kid was used to taking care of himself, but the truth of the matter was, he wasn’t capable of doing that at the moment. Not with the Friedrich situation, and not with recovering from the horrors of the Justice Facility, not to mention whatever had happened with the other inmate.

He could listen to Neal, and go back to bed. Cuddle with his wife. Close the doors and do his best to ignore any sounds coming from this room. Or, he could do what Neal wouldn’t ask for but most likely needed.

With a grim roll of his eyes, Peter lifted the blankets and climbed into the bed, stretching out on his back.

Neal froze again. “Peter, what are you doing?” he asked cautiously.

“Going back to sleep, and so are you,” said Peter.

Neal twisted and sat up in the bed, staring down at Peter with a strained look on his face. “You don’t have to stay here,” he said. “I appreciate you staying last night, but really, I—”

“For the love of — will you just stop saying you’re fine? It didn’t work out so well this afternoon, remember?” Peter started to reach up towards Neal – to do what, he wasn’t sure – but then caught himself and shifted direction, running a hand through his own hair.

“Isn’t this…a little weird? For you?” asked Neal. “Your wife is in the next room. You should be with her. Why are you…” he trailed off, as though unsure how to phrase his question.

Peter sighed. “Look. Last night, you slept pretty well when I was in here. Therefore, so did I. You need sleep. So do I. Let’s not…worry about how it happens, just that it happens. El will understand. You need me. You needed me when you were stuck in that hellhole, you needed me this afternoon, and you need me now. You may not like it, but you do. Let me help you.”

Neal continued to stare at him, but Peter didn’t move. After a few minutes, Neal slid back down under the blankets and positioned himself on his back. They weren’t touching, but Peter could feel the heat coming from the other man’s body.

“I just don’t understand…” said Neal.
Peter waited for Neal to finish his sentence. The silence stretched between them.

Finally, Peter prodded him. “You don’t understand what?”

“Why?” asked Neal.

Neal had asked him that at the Justice Facility, too. Why he was helping. Peter was once again struck by the fact that Neal had probably never had anyone help him just because he was him, and not because there was something in it for them. He guessed that, with Neal playing the con all of the time, steeped in ulterior motives, he found it hard to believe that someone might not have an ulterior motive.

Before, he had responded with a light joke. This time, he wanted to say something real, but wasn’t sure what. The truth was, he didn’t know exactly why he was working so hard to help this kid he had stuck behind bars four years ago. He hadn’t really stopped to think about why. He hadn’t stopped to think about whether he would, he had immediately jumped to how.

“Because I want to,” Peter said. It wasn’t precisely right. Or rather, it wasn’t precisely everything. “Because…you could be…” Peter tried again, and then stopped. “I don’t know, Neal. Honestly, I don’t know why. Does it matter?”

Neal moved, and Peter guessed he was shrugging under the blankets.

“I guess not,” he said. “But I can’t…I thought I had you all figured out.”

Peter smiled up at the ceiling. “Yeah, that goes both ways. At any rate, I’m in this now, and you may recall that I don’t give up easily.”

Neal snorted. “I think that rings a bell.”

“Go to sleep,” said Peter.

“Good night, Peter.” Neal sighed, and shifted slightly.

“Good night, Neal.”

Peter drifted off to sleep, still puzzling over Neal’s question. Why was it so important to him to protect Neal from all of the challenges that seemed to be plaguing him?

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**Sunday, June 27, 7:42AM**

When Neal woke up the next morning, he was coming out of a particularly nice dream. He was warm, and safe, and felt like there was nothing he couldn’t have. The world was his for the taking.

He burrowed his face into the warmth, feeling the slow rise and fall of the bed, hearing the air rushing in and out, the beating of the bed’s heart, steady and comforting. He wiggled against the blankets, which felt particularly solid. Maybe he could finish what he hadn’t been able to the night before, when Peter—

And his eyes flew open.

It wasn’t the bed that was so warm and comforting – come on, Neal, beds don’t have heartbeats – it was Peter. Sometime during the night, Neal had sprawled himself all over Peter. He was smushed up against Peter’s side, his head resting on the man’s chest. His left arm was flung across
Peter’s stomach and curled around his side. His left leg was hiked up and hooked around Peter’s opposite hip, as though he was making sure the man wasn’t able to get away.

He felt something solid along his back, and he realized that Peter’s arm was curled up around him as well.

*Oh, god,* Neal thought. *This is worse than the last time.*

Maybe it was worse because, this time, it was Neal who had been wiggling against Peter’s side, rather than Peter who had been caressing Neal. In fact, from what he could tell, Peter was still asleep.

Neal decided to try to take advantage of that fact. He untangled himself from Peter’s arm – slowly, oh so slowly – and eased off of the bed. He stood there for a moment, watching Peter. His chest rose and fell steadily, his arm now lying at his side, under the blankets.

Neal breathed a sigh of relief.

He edged out of the room, and fifteen minutes later, had settled himself on a stool at the counter in the kitchen. Coffee was brewing – it was Italian roast – and he was munching on a muffin. In front of him was the forged Spanish Victory bond, still encased in the plastic evidence bag.

It really was beautiful work. Neal allowed himself a moment to be impressed by the artistry, and then got down to business. Using a magnifying glass he had found in the junk drawer – *of course Peter Burke had a magnifying glass in the junk drawer* – he laboriously examined every inch of the bond.

By the time Peter pushed through the kitchen door, looking delightfully scruffy from sleep, Neal was grinning.

Peter stopped in the doorway, taken aback by Neal’s open smile.

“What are you up to?” he asked, a cautious note to his voice.

“I know who the Dutchman is,” said Neal.

Peter froze. Neal almost laughed at the picture. Peter had his hand half way up to stifle a yawn, his mouth partly open. But his eyes had blown wide.

Suddenly, Peter was on the move. He crossed space in a second and grabbed Neal’s shoulder.

“Neal,” he said, “What the hell are you talking about?”

Neal smiled, the smile creeping across his face like an old friend. It was real, genuine. He was happy. He knew what he was doing, knew that he had cracked the case. He knew Peter would be happy with him, and that was something that he couldn’t fake.

“His name is Curtis Hagan,” said Neal. He sounded like a kid showing his homework to his dad, but he couldn’t help it. “He’s an art restorer. One of the best in the world, but his own work never took off. He’s particularly good at Goya restorations.” Neal paused. “That’s what this is, Peter. He’s showing off.”

Peter stepped back and ran a hand through his hair. He yawned.

Neal slid off of the stool and crossed to the French press. The coffee was probably ready. He
poured two cups, added cream, and returned to Peter, pressing one mug into Peter’s hand.

“Mmm. Thank you,” murmured Peter, as he downed half of the steaming cup in one gulp.

Neal waited.

Finally, Peter’s eyes cleared. “So. Hagan. Interesting theory, but how do we prove it?”

“He signed it,” said Neal proudly.

Peter let out a short laugh. “I think we might have noticed if—“

“If I had done something this good, I would have signed it,” said Neal. “Hell, I signed the bonds you caught me on.”

Peter blinked at him, and then his gaze sharpened. “Where?”

Neal rolled his eyes. “Check the bonds under polarized light sometime,” he said.

He spun the forged bond around so that Peter could see, and set the magnifying glass over the right spot. He tapped his finger on it

“There,” he said, “in the pants of the Spanish peasant. There’s a C and an H.”

Peter leaned forward and peered at the indicated spot. After a minute, he straightened up. “Maybe,” he said, a cautious tone in his voice.

“Okay, look,” said Neal, “Hagan is in New York. He’s working on a church restoration on Third Street. You a church-goer, Peter?”

A smile lit Peter’s face. He slung an arm around Neal. Neal tried not to think about how good that felt.

“I’m not,” said Peter. “But I’m suddenly getting the urge to admire a pulpit.”

Neal grinned. He had no idea what was going to happen to him … when he would have to run, how to find Kate, whether Friedrich would stick him back in the Justice Facility… but he knew one thing.

They were going to catch the Dutchman.
Chapter Summary

Peter makes a mistake, and Neal pays the price.

Chapter Notes

Hi all!

First, thank you so much for your love for this story. I know that I spoiled you for a while, giving you lots of chapter updates fast. If things slow, please don't be afraid. I have a more-than-full-time job which is crazy this time of year and THREE part-time jobs, and sometimes I have more time to write than others. I've got at least another ten chapters already planned out and will work on them as quickly as I can as my schedule allows while maintaining quality (I hope). Thank you for your patience.

Chapter Seventeen: Boundaries

Sunday, June 27, 9:14AM

When Neal Caffrey caught a scent, he wasn’t easily distracted. He’d focus in on the puzzle, the lead, and his brain would play out countless possibilities and scenarios, sifting through bits of information, trying to see connections that no one else could see. If he was in the zone, there wasn’t much anyone could say or do that would pull his thoughts in another direction.

In that way, Peter realized, they weren’t all that different. He definitely identified with the urge to solve the mystery, to see the path to the solution and follow it, step by step, until all was revealed. His empathy was probably why he was patiently smiling at Neal while the kid paced the living room in his shiny shoes and spun out a series of possibilities.

“If it is Hagan – which it is,” said Neal, “how do we connect him to the bonds? He must have someplace where he’s planning to do the printing, and it has to be pretty big to hold machines that would handle a job this complex.”

“Neal,” began Peter. But Neal was on a roll.

“I bet he’s holding property in some other name, through a corporation or something. This guy is notorious for his layers of protection. It’s why you guys never have anything on him. He buries his involvement so deep it’s impossible to connect him. But this time, with the signature…”

“I know,” said Peter. “Neal—“

“Unless he’s working with a partner,” said Neal. He paused in front of the fireplace, tracing the edge with a finger. “We’ll have to find out if there are any rumors, anything to connect him with another player. I could—“
“Neal!”

Neal stopped talking and turned his head. “Peter?”

“One step at a time,” he said. “You found something on the bond that could possibly be a signature. We know Hagan is here in New York. We know he specializes in Goyas. This is good. Let’s check out this church restoration, see what we see.”

Neal nodded, then smiled sheepishly. “Sorry,” he said. “I play chess.”

Peter snorted. “Obviously. Shall we go?” He gestured towards the door.

Neal led the way. They exited the house, Peter locking the door behind him. Neal started up his chatter again as they descended the steps to the street.

“So I think we should try to get some time to examine the restoration,” said Neal. “See if there’s a similar signature there, or some quirk of the style that I can spot to make the connection stronger. The church is closed right now, and if you go in there flashing your badge, Hagan will run. Here’s what I’m thinking. I can be scouting out the location for—”

“Nothing illegal,” said Peter. “Remember the rules.”

“Nothing illegal, I swear. Just a little…white lie to grease the gears—“

“Neal.” Peter rolled his eyes. “Let’s go and see if they’ll let us in first. You’re right, if it is him, we need to figure out where he’s printing these things. I can get Diana digging around on that. After she—“

Peter frowned. He had been about to say, _After she gets back to me on Friedrich_ , but then he remembered Neal didn’t know about that. He cleared his throat, hoping Neal wouldn’t ask, as they approached the sidewalk.

“I’ll make a list for her,” Neal was saying. “Things to look for in shell companies and properties that might work for this—“

He stopped and made a small grunt, his eyes going wide and his hands flying up to his neck.

Peter turned around, peering at him. “Neal?”

Neal made another small sound, and took a step backwards, towards the house. He was looking at Peter like…it was a cross between betrayal and fear.

“Neal, what’s going on?” he asked, stepping towards the man.

“Ah-ah!” Neal’s grunts were getting louder, and he stumbled slightly when he hit the step. His hands were both clutching at his neck. “Peter,” he managed, “the – ah – the tracker. You didn’t – ah – god—“

Peter’s phone started beeping, and his eyes widened in understanding. Neal’s collar was shocking him for crossing the boundary of the yard. “Shit,” he said. “I forgot to change the radius. It’s still set for the house. Neal, I’m so sorry.”

“Okay, can you – ah – can you fix it?” Neal collapsed onto the bottom step, and he was breathing heavily. “It’s – ah – getting stronger.”

Peter pulled out his phone and navigated to the tracker app. “Hang on, I’ve got it,” he said. He
fiddled with the app frantically, until he had released the boundary and set the tracker to a radius around Peter himself. He glanced up at Neal, who was staring back at him, rigid, waiting for the next shock.

After a minute with no further activity from the collar, he took a shaky breath. Peter sank down onto the step beside him, patting him all over.

“Okay, it’s done. I’m so sorry, Neal. It was a stupid mistake. I’m sorry. You all right?”

Neal’s breathing slowed to almost normal. “Sure,” he said. “No problem. Easy mistake. Just don’t…don’t make it again, okay?”

Peter winced. It was so…Neal… to brush this off, but now that the panic was over, the guilt had started to swell up like a tidal wave. Without thinking, he grabbed Neal and pulled him into a tight embrace. Neal stiffened slightly, but then relaxed.

Peter rose, pulling Neal with him. “Come on,” he said. “Back in the house.”

“What? No. We’ve got to go see—“

“We will,” said Peter. “In a minute. First, I want to make sure you’re okay.”

Neal let Peter drag him up the stairs, waited while he unlocked the door, and then let Peter pull him into the house and deposit him on the sofa.

“I swear I’m okay, Peter,” he said.

Peter ignored him and went to the kitchen. When he came back, he had a glass of water and a damp paper towel. He set the water on the coffee table and sat beside Neal. Disregarding Neal’s protests, Peter loosened Neal’s tie and examined the collar underneath.

He could remove it, but it really wasn’t supposed to be removed. The Court had been very clear about the conditional release, and the collar was non-negotiable. He satisfied himself with lifting the collar higher on Neal’s neck so he could see the skin underneath. Neal made a small whimper, and Peter gentled his fingers as best he could.

There were small burn marks, evenly spaced, around Neal’s neck. Peter dabbed at each of them in turn, his guilt overwhelming him with each hiss of pain his ministrations caused.

Elizabeth came down the stairs, fastening an earring. “I thought you boys left,” she said. When she reached the bottom step and saw Peter tending to Neal, she paused. “What’s going on?”

“Peter decided to test out the collar,” said Neal, with a dry smirk.

“He did what?” Elizabeth sounded scandalized, and she turned a sharp glare on Peter.

“I didn’t…I forgot to change the boundaries when we left, and it went off when we left the yard,” Peter explained. He shook his head at Neal’s sense of humor. It was going to get him in trouble.

Elizabeth hurried over and sat on Neal’s other side. She peered at his neck, reaching out. Her fingers hovered over the fresh burn marks, but didn’t touch.

“These little ones are from the collar?” she asked.

Neal nodded.
“You poor thing,” said Elizabeth. “Can I get you some aspirin? Maybe aloe would help.”

“Have I said yet that I’m sorry?” asked Peter. “Damn it.”

Neal took Elizabeth’s hands in his and lowered them, stroking his thumbs over the back of her hands. But it was Peter whose gaze he sought. “Peter, it’s really fine. I’ve had worse.”

Peter settled the collar in place, and sat back. He remembered the taser at the Justice Facility, and knew it to be true. The old burn marks from that were still healing on his neck. He wondered if Neal was also thinking of his time with Friedrich.

“All right,” he said. “How come it kept shocking you even after you stepped back from the boundary?”

Neal smirked at him. “You’ve got it set to punish me,” he said.

“Punish you?” asked Elizabeth. “Peter, really.”

“I don’t…okay, clearly I should look up a manual on this thing,” Peter ran a hand through his hair, sighing in frustration.

“You could just have it so it goes off when I cross a boundary and keeps going off until I’m back where I’m supposed to be,” Neal explained. “Or, it’s got this spectacularly evil mode where it will keep delivering shocks of increasing intensity even after I’m in the radius, as a punishment.”

Peter frowned and pulled out his phone again. “Okay, we’re going to make sure that’s off,” he said. He fiddled with the settings until he found what he was looking for. While he was at it, he increased the radius around him, so that he didn’t accidentally get too far away from the kid and make him suffer again.

“You could also set it so that it’s longer between shocks,” said Neal. “I mean, if you wanted to.”

Peter raised an eyebrow at him, but turned back to the app. He found what he was looking for.

“The longest delay setting is four minutes,” he said.

“That means that, if I am out of radius, I’ll only get shocked once every four minutes. Don’t worry, they’ll still keep getting worse until eventually they’ll be strong enough to incapacitate me,” he said.

Peter watched him carefully. “You believe me that that was a mistake, right?” he asked. “I wasn’t testing you or anything.”

“I believe you,” said Neal. “Though it would be a good experiment. See how well this thing keeps me in line. Go ahead and decrease the interval if you want. I think you can even set it to constant.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” said Peter. He set the interval to four minutes, and also changed the setting so that each shock was increased minimally. It would take a long time for the collar to incapacitate Neal with these settings.

Neal watched him, and seemed relieved.

“You’re not going to take advantage of this and try to run, right?” asked Peter. He was half-joking.

Neal rolled his eyes. “Even with those settings, I wouldn’t get too far,” he said. “Now, can we go? I really want to check out Hagan.”

Peter studied him, and then nodded.
“Neal, are you sure you’re okay?” asked Elizabeth. “Peter could go on his own and report back.”

In answer, Neal squeezed her hands once, then stood and crossed to the door. “You coming, Peter?” he asked, turning back with a smile. “I don’t want to get too far ahead.”

* WC – WC – WC – WC – WC – WC – WC *

Sunday, June 27, 11:38AM

Neal’s stride was long as they left the church and turned down the street towards the car. He was annoyed…with himself.

A short time earlier, they had entered the church. Sure enough, the pastor had tried to get them to leave, explaining that the church was closed for restoration. Neal was still a little stunned Peter had gotten the signal and had actually stepped away and allowed Neal to con their way in. It had been fun, more fun than he’d had in a while, and it was sanctioned by the FBI. Weird. He was also a little proud at how easy it had been. He hadn’t lost his touch.

The forger was Hagan. Neal was now one hundred percent certain. He had found a similar set of initials buried in a similar way in the Goya restoration the man was working on.

And, in his excitement at having been right and having proved to Peter that he knew what he was doing, he had gotten sloppy.


Beside him, Peter was on the phone.

“Oh, okay, thanks, Diana. Give me a call when you turn anything up.” Peter paused, listening. “I definitely do, but not right now…no, let’s talk in person in the morning. Just tell me…is it helpful?”

Neal peered at Peter. What were they talking about?

“Really.” Peter’s voice was grim. “Maybe it can’t wait until morning. I hate to ask, but…thank you, Diana. I appreciate it.”

Peter ended the call and slid his phone into his jacket pocket.

“What did Diana have to say?” asked Neal. He tried to sound as casual as possible. He tucked his hands into his pockets and loosened his stride, making his physical presence convey what his voice might not.

Peter shrugged. “She’ll look into Hagan. We should get home, get you going on that list of things she can look at.”

“Anything I can help with?”

“No, not yet,” said Peter. “I’ll let you know. For now, keep your sights on Hagan.”

Neal was silent for a minute. Peter was lying. Or, at least, not telling the whole truth. He decided
not to press the issue. It sounded like Diana and Peter were going to meet up later. He could find a way to learn more then.

The sidewalk was filled with people. They had managed to find a parking spot a couple of blocks away, but the after-church brunch crowd was out in full force, and Neal found himself edging around pedestrians going in the opposite direction. He focused on the mechanics of that, and starting thinking about what he would suggest to Diana about looking for Hagan’s property holdings.

Still, he was an observer by nature. That was why, despite his preoccupation, he noted a short man moving toward them. He was wearing a baseball cap pulled low on his forehead and a dark green jacket that was too warm for late June. The man’s hand patted his right jacket pocket, and then did it again. Neal risked a glance at Peter, who seemed lost in his own thoughts.

He began to time his steps and his movements. As the man approached, he stepped to the right around a pedestrian and then left until he was almost touching Peter, putting the short man on his right. He stepped back to the right slightly just as the man came even with him.

They bumped.

“Sorry,” said Neal, as his hand slipped into the man’s pocket, grasped a hard rectangular object, and then back out and into his own.

He increased his stride to catch up with Peter, who had gotten ahead while Neal had been picking the man’s pocket.

Peter didn’t even notice.

**Good old Mozzie,** thought Neal, thinking of the phone in his pocket. No doubt it was an untraceable burner. No doubt it had Mozzie’s number programmed in. Maybe Mozzie had news on Kate. And, maybe it was time to bring his old friend into the hunt to bring down Hagan.
Chapter Summary

Diana reveals some disturbing findings; Neal reaches out to Mozzie for help; more nightmares.

Chapter Notes

First, my apologies for the delay. This chapter was a struggle, for a number of reasons, and I'm still not entirely happy with it. So...second, my apologies if this chapter doesn't land right. I'll make up for it, I promise. The next three should be better, and hopefully will be updated more quickly.

Thank you for your patience!

Chapter Eighteen: Patterns

Sunday, June 27, 1:10PM

Peter wondered about Neal’s past, his life before Peter had caught up with him and arrested him. He knew some things – Neal’s food and wine preferences, his skills with a paintbrush, how widely read he seemed to be – but there were some things that he had never had occasion to learn.

One of those things was the way Neal worked through information and processed research. He had always thought of Neal as a creature of impulse and instinct: he had an idea, he developed it quickly, he acted immediately. That fast-thinking was one of those things that continued to fascinate and delight Peter.

But, apparently, Neal could be methodical as well.

At the moment, Neal was hunched over a notebook and a laptop at the dining room table, alternating regularly between tapping at the keyboard, clicking the mouse, and scribbling meticulous notes on his paper. He was looking for leads on properties owned or leased by Hagan or known associates, and then following each lead to its conclusion.

Peter was sitting on the sofa, the Dutchman files spread out on the coffee table, doing the same thing, in much the same manner. That fact, and the similarities in their research styles, wasn’t lost on Peter. It gave him a warm, satisfied sort of feeling in his chest.

“Try looking for something connected to Harold Nettles,” said Peter, after a while.

“Harold Nettles?” asked Neal. He paused and looked over at Peter. “The curator of Middle Eastern antiquities at the British Museum?”

Peter blinked, and then burst out laughing. “Damn, Neal,” he said. “Why am I not surprised?
Should I be worried about this insider knowledge?"

Neal shrugged, unconcerned. “Middle Eastern antiquities were never my thing,” he said. “If something goes missing, it wasn’t me, and you’d know that.”

“So how do you know who Nettles is?”

“I do have friends,” said Neal, smiling.

Peter knew it. He also knew that Neal had made contact with one of those “friends” that very morning. The short guy on Third Street. Peter had noticed the man’s odd clothing, had seen the slight hesitation as Neal adjusted his steps, and hadn’t missed the *oops sorry* jostle.

He also knew the man had passed something to Neal during that exchange. He wondered if he should be worried about it, but decided to hold onto his knowledge for a bit. See if Neal came clean on his own.

Neal turned his attention back to the computer. “What’s Nettles’s connection to Hagan?” he asked.

Peter pulled up a piece of paper and peered at it. “Maybe nothing,” he said. “But Hagan is suspected of being connected with the theft of some antique Middle Eastern metalwork a couple of years ago. Nettles was questioned and…there’s something about his statement that feels off.”

“Seems out of Hagan’s normal line of interests,” murmured Neal.

Peter’s response was interrupted by a knock on the door. Neal looked up.

“We expecting someone?” he asked.

Peter leveled a look at him. “You probably figured that out from my phone conversation earlier.”

Neal had the decency to look a touch sheepish. “Diana?”

Peter nodded, and went to the door. Diana grinned up at him.

“Hey boss,” she said.

“Come on in.” Peter stepped aside and let her into the room. “Thanks for coming by on a Sunday. You’re going well over and above this weekend.”


“Can’t stay away?” he asked with a grin. Peter could tell Neal’s smile was about seventy-percent fake. The kid knew something was up, and was calculating the best way to figure out what it was.

Peter considered his problem. He needed to talk to Diana about what she had found without Neal hearing. Maybe he’d tell Neal the results, but that depended on what the results were. He could be subtle about it…and of course Neal would see right through it.

“Neal,” he said. “I need to talk with Diana privately. Could you go up to your room?”

Neal blinked, and then narrowed his eyes. “Keeping secrets, Peter?”

“No secrets,” said Peter. “This just isn’t for your ears.”

Neal stood but didn’t move towards the stairs. “If it’s about Hagan, or about me and my case, I’d
“I’m sure you would.” They stared at each other. Diana looked back and forth between them, interest clear in her eyes.

“Is it about me?” asked Neal.

Peter realized that, underneath his suspicion, Neal was nervous. No, more than nervous. He was scared. He was aware that his reprieve from the Justice Facility could be yanked away at any moment, his fatal fate restored.

Neal was also used to being in control. Peter would be willing to bet that during his time in the work camp, he had had the system rigged to his liking. The kid probably had guards and other inmates falling all over themselves to make his life easier. Peter wondered how much control Neal had lost while he was in Friedrich’s hands…and, of course, he had been completely powerless in the Justice Facility.

If their arrangement was going to work – now and if he was successful in forcing the sale – Neal was going to have to get used to the idea that he wasn’t in complete control anymore. Peter was the one who needed to hold the reins. He didn’t think of Neal as his slave, exactly…but he also wasn’t about to let Neal do whatever he wanted while Peter was responsible for him. He couldn’t. He’d lose his job, his reputation, everything, if Neal started committing crimes under Peter’s nose.

What was that saying? *Begin as you mean to go on*… Well, he had begun with compassion, and fairness, and offering friendship. It was time to make the power structure clear.

“All you need to know right now is that I’ve told you to go up to your room. I do not want you listening in on this conversation. If I decide it concerns you and that you need to know about it, I will tell you then. Not before.”

Peter could see Neal’s jaw clench. His eyes darkened, and Peter could tell he was barely containing his anger.

“Neal. Upstairs.” He paused, and then added, in a softer tone, “Trust me.”

There was a soft explosion of breath. Neal must have been holding it in. He was still frowning, and his eyes were still murderous, but without another word, he moved towards the stairs, his steps deliberate. He seemed just short of stamping his feet, and Peter was suddenly amused.

As he passed by, Peter reached out and grabbed his arm. “I’ll come talk to you in a bit,” he said quietly. He rubbed his thumb in a small circle on Neal’s tense bicep.

Neal’s step faltered, and he looked Peter in the eye. He relaxed slightly, and gave an almost imperceptible nod. Then he continued up the stairs, more subdued.

Diana watched him go, and let out a low whistle. “You’ve got your work cut out for you, Peter,” she said. “You sure this is a good idea? He looked like he wanted to slit your throat.”

Peter smiled. “He’s fine. Let’s go out back. I wouldn’t put it past him to try to listen in.”

He led the way outside, closing the patio door behind them. Once they were seated at the patio table, he held his finger to his lips.

“We’ll need to keep our voices down,” he said.
“Actually, that’s what I needed to talk to you about,” said Diana. She pulled a small object out of her pocket and put it on the table. Peter leaned in and examined it. It was a signal jammer. A good one. A tiny green LED light flashed at one end. It was on.

“A jammer?” asked Peter.

Diana nodded, her lips pressed into a grim line. “We didn’t find anything – yet – on the car that nearly ran Neal over yesterday. We got a partial plate from a security cam, and Jones is running that down. He’ll get there. But, in the meantime, I did find something else. I think you’re being monitored.”

Peter sat back and looked around. The yard was empty, but he felt a chill run down his spine.

“Tell me what you’ve found,” he said, leaning close so they could speak in a whisper.

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Sunday, June 27, 1:34PM

Neal spent a good ten minutes pacing the confines of the guest room. He had still been in the upstairs hallway when he heard the back door open and close. Peter apparently didn’t trust Neal not to try to listen.

Since he had been planning to try to listen, that was smart of Peter, but also hurt a little.

Once in his room, he had looked out the window, but decided against trying to open it. Peter would hear, and it was unlikely they’d speak loudly enough for him to be able to tell what they were saying.

It was driving him crazy. He had a right to know what was going on, whether it was with his case, or had something to do with Friedrich, or if it was about Hagan…he had a right to know. He wasn’t just some…mindless slave.

Only, Neal realized suddenly, that’s exactly what he was. Still.

He stopped pacing and screwed his eyes shut, desperately blocking out images that were coming into focus. The cage, the restraints, the way he couldn’t even control….

Neal shook his head and opened his eyes. He wasn’t there anymore. He wasn’t with Friedrich. Peter didn’t think about him that way, as if he was an object and nothing more. Peter saw him as an equal, someone who was intelligent, and capable, and worthy.

Except for ten minutes ago, when he had sent Neal upstairs in a tone of voice that Neal hadn’t heard before, one that brooked no argument. It was odd, the way he had reacted when Peter had said All you need to know right now is that I’ve told you to go up to your room. It was like a switch flicked inside him, and he was no longer able to respond as himself.

He had wanted to shout at Peter, to tell him he was out of line, and that he couldn’t play with Neal’s life that way. But he couldn’t do it. He felt the anger, but it stayed inside. And then Peter had said trust me, and touched his arm, and all the fight went out of him.

He did trust Peter. Peter, who had swooped into the Justice Facility like an avenging angel and rescued him. Peter, who had taken care of his wounds. Peter, who had pulled him out of the path of a car. Peter, who had slept in bed with him, for fuck’s sake, so that he wouldn’t have nightmares.
The truth of the matter was, Peter could play with Neal’s life, however he wanted to. That was part of the deal. It’s a good deal, you idiot, thought Neal. At least with Peter. Because Neal knew Peter wouldn’t do anything that he didn’t honestly think was good for Neal, no matter how much Neal disagreed.

Neal took a slow breath in, counting to four. Then he held it for four seconds, let it out for another count of four, and held it for four seconds again. He repeated this several times until he was able to sink onto the bed, back in control.

His mind started to work properly again. If Peter was outside with Diana, and Elizabeth was at the store, then he was truly alone for the first time all day. He had a minute to do something he had been thinking about since just after the encounter with Hagan.

He reached down, pulled the slim burner phone out from under the mattress, and turned it on. It flashed for a moment and then he could see the screen. He fiddled with it until he got into the contacts, and found one saved number, for a “Dante Haversham.”

Neal smiled. Not a bad alias for Mozzie.

He dialed Haversham and waited. After a few rings, someone answered but did not speak.

“Haversham, this is Halden,” said Neal.

He heard Mozzie chuckle. “Good to hear your voice,” said Mozzie. “I was half afraid the Suit would be the one to call.”

“He doesn’t know I have the phone,” said Neal. “Smooth drop, and I hid it once I got home.”

“You’re alone now?”

“Yeah, for a minute. I don’t know how long. Thanks for this, you have no idea how hard it’s been to not know how to get in touch with…someone. Moz, any news?”

“No names!” said Mozzie, and then he sighed. “She was at an ATM in San Diego a few days ago.”

Neal froze. “How do you know?”

“Security cam footage. I’ll text it to you.”

Neal waited, and after a moment, the photo came through. It was a little fuzzy on the burner’s crappy screen, but sure enough, it was Kate. She looked…nervous, he realized. She was facing the ATM, but her eyes were angled down and to the left, as though she was trying to keep an eye on the person behind her. Whoever it was, his hand was possessively clamped on her shoulder.

“How did you get this?” asked Neal.

“Come on, you know better than to ask that. She’s using the name Kate Perdu.”

“Perdu. As in French for ‘lost’?”

“Who knows, man? She was always a little hard to figure.”

Neal heard the back door opening. “Listen, Moz, I’ve got to go.”

“No names! Take care of yourself. Let me know if you need anything.”
Neal smiled again. Good old Mozzie. “By the way,” he said, “you were right about the signature. The counterfeiter is Curtis Hagan.”

“Really. Interesting,” said Mozzie.

“Yeah, and I was stupid and he spotted me,” said Neal. “I might have spooked him, and if he runs…”

“If he runs…what?”

“I’m toast.”

There was a beat of silence. Neal could hear Peter and Diana talking in the living room. He was running out of time.

“We’re trying to find where he might be printing the bonds. Any chance you—“

“I’m on it,” said Moz. “No way you’re going back. Either we’ll get Hagan or I’ll help you escape.”

“Thank you,” said Neal. He heard the front door close. Escape seemed like such a foreign concept. After his experience with the shocks that morning, he didn’t think he’d be able to run with the collar, and he couldn’t see how he was going to get it off. But he’d keep thinking.

The line went dead, and Neal shut off the phone. He tucked it back under the mattress just as he heard Peter’s footsteps on the stairs. A moment later, there was a knock on his door.

“Come in,” he said.

The door opened, and Peter leaned up against it, studying him. He was frowning, the lines around his mouth and eyes more pronounced than usual. Neal held back a shudder. His first thought was that Peter was angry with him, but then his second thought was worse. What had Diana had to say?

Peter was silent for so long, Neal couldn’t take it anymore. He got to his feet.

“Peter,” he began, “I know you think—“

Peter held up a hand. He was angry, then.

Neal tried again. “Listen. I know you don’t technically have to, but if you know something about —“

Before Neal could say another word, Peter moved forward in a flash and closed a hand over Neal’s mouth. Neal jumped backward, but Peter pressed forward, his other hand landing firmly on the back of Neal’s head to more effectively muzzle him. Neal grappled with Peter’s arms, panic rising in him. What—

“Shhhh,” said Peter. He leaned close, and Neal flinched. But then Peter was whispering, his breath tickling Neal’s earlobe. “Don’t talk yet.”

Peter leaned back and caught Neal’s eye. Neal nodded, or tried to. It was hard with Peter holding his head so firmly. Cautiously, Peter removed his hands. Neal kept his mouth closed.

Peter reached a hand into his pocket and pulled out a small black object. He flicked at its side, and a tiny green light started flashing. Neal’s eyes widened as soon as he realized what it was. He had been friends with Mozzie too long not to know a bug-canceler when he saw one.
“It’s a signal jammer,” said Peter, in his normal voice.

Neal eyed it. “I know what it is. Peter, why are we using a signal jammer?”

“Let’s sit,” said Peter. He moved around Neal and sat on the bed, and after a moment, Neal joined him. “Diana has been doing some digging for me, on the side.”

Neal stayed quiet, but he felt zings of unease coming to life in his stomach. What exactly was she digging into?

“I asked her to look into a couple of things, but mainly, she’s been digging up dirt on Friedrich. Trying to find out what we can in advance of the hearing.”

“Get your ammunition ready,” said Neal. “Smart.”

“Sure.” Peter rubbed a hand through his hair. “Also, since you won’t tell me anything about what actually happened with this other inmate, she’s carefully looking into that as well.”

Neal reached out and gripped Peter’s arm before he knew what he was doing. “That’s a bad idea,” he said. “You should leave it alone.”

Peter’s frown deepened. “Neal.” He put his hand over Neal’s and squeezed. “Tell me what happened. We need to know, so we know what to—“

“No,” said Neal. He pulled his hand back and stared at the ground. “Just…leave it alone.”

There was a beat of silence, and then Peter sighed. “She’s being careful, which is why she hasn’t found anything yet.”

Neal relaxed slightly. If they could get past the hearing without needing it, he hoped that Peter would be able to just forget about it, let it all stay buried. He looked up, and studied Peter.

“If she hasn’t found anything, what was she doing here?” he asked.

“She found something else,” said Peter. “She tracked some payments – well-buried payments, I might add – to an individual with whom we’re familiar. This guy is a security expert, but he works in the grey area of the law. We’ve never had enough on him to bring him in, but we’ve suspected that he set up surveillance in preparation of a number of robberies and violent crimes.”

“Who?”

“Name’s Gregory Wheaton,” said Peter. “Ring any bells?”

Neal nodded. “Yeah, I know of him.”

“Ever used him?”

Neal shot Peter a look. “Why would I ever have reason to use someone like that?” At Peter’s look in response, he rolled his eyes. “Look, if I ever wanted to case a job, I would do it myself. Otherwise it’s just lazy work, and lazy work gets everyone caught.”

Peter snorted. “Yeah, you would want to do everything yourself. Control freak.”

“What does Wheaton have to do with us?” asked Neal, even though he had already guessed the answer.
“Maybe nothing,” said Peter. “We have no way of knowing if Friedrich’s payments to Wheaton are related or not, except for the coincidental timing. The payments were made on Friday.”

“So you think that Wheaton may be surveilling the house,” said Neal, his voice strained. “Watching me.”

“Probably me, too,” said Peter. “We’re going to have to be very careful what we say until we have a chance to sweep the place. I’ll have a crew come out tomorrow.”

Neal scuffed a foot on the carpet, and then a thought occurred to him.

“Elizabeth,” he said, his voice rising in alarm. If something happened to her, he’d never forgive himself. “What if—“

“She’s fine,” said Peter. “I called her, she’s nearly home. We’ll tell her about the monitoring once she gets here. No reason to worry her.”

“But if Friedrich is watching us, he might be watching her,” said Neal. “This is…I’m putting you both in danger.” He lowered his head. Peter didn’t deserve this. Neither of them did.

“Hey.” Neal felt Peter’s hand on his back, his fingers splayed across the tense muscles. It rubbed up and down, slowly, and Neal shuddered. “It’s unlikely Elizabeth is in any danger. If this is Friedrich – and we don’t know if he’s actually done anything, because we haven’t found any cameras or bugs – he may just be trying to figure out what we know, and how we’re going to force the sale.”

“Peter, if he’s watching, he can act. You don’t know what he’s capable of.”

“So tell me,” said Peter, his hand stilling.

Neal wasn’t going to tell Peter about Friedrich. Not now, not ever. But there was something else he was considering. He was pretty sure it was a terrible idea, but it was something he could contribute. Something he could do to help the situation.

“Your crew might not find everything when they look,” said Neal. “Wheaton’s equipment might be too advanced.”

“For the F.B.I.?” asked Peter. He sounded like he thought the idea was funny.

“Yes, for the F.B.I. You guys color inside the lines too much. What you need is someone who is more experienced with…creative thinking.” He paused.

Peter took his hand away and shifted on the bed, until Neal looked him in the eye. “Do you have someone in mind?” he asked.

Neal took a deep breath. “I do. But it’s going to take a leap of faith.”

“Why?”

“Because this guy is a little…odd. And if I ask for his help, you can’t be here when he’s here, and you can’t ask any questions about him.”

“No,” said Peter.

“Peter—“
“No. Neal, I’m not thrilled that you’re renewing old contacts so quickly, but I’m willing to look the other way while you let them pass you a burner phone or whatever—“

Neal looked at Peter sharply. Peter knew about that? The man was even more dangerous than he’d thought. He’d have to be more careful.

“—as long as you’re not getting into trouble. That does not apply to someone being in my house. If he’s here, I’m here.”

Neal thought. Mozzie wanted to help him, and if he thought Neal’s safety was on the line, he’d probably don a ridiculous disguise and allow Peter to lay eyes on him. “He might not want to do it, anyway,” he said. “But maybe I could convince him if you promised not to ask questions.”

Peter pursed his lips. “Yeah, okay,” said Peter. “He’s good at things like this?”

“The best,” said Neal. “I wouldn’t trust anyone else.”

“All right, contact him. Have him come by in the morning.” Peter stood. “Let’s go downstairs. El should be home any minute.”

“I’ll be right down,” said Neal. “After I send a message. On my burner phone.”

He smiled at Peter, who smiled back indulgently. “Stay out of trouble,” he warned. “I mean it, Neal. Keep your phone, contact your friend, but keep your nose clean.”

Neal raised his palms outward and flashed Peter his most charming smile. “I swear. Clean nose. No shenanigans.”

* WC – WC – WC – WC – WC – WC – WC *

Monday, June 28, 12:27AM

Neal was screaming. Peter bolted from his bed, ignoring El, who was calling after him. He was in Neal’s room in seconds, his heart pounding. He was screaming, punching the air, twisting his body on the bed, jerking around like someone was grabbing onto him.

Peter lunged forward, calling Neal’s name, but Neal was too deep to answer. With a curse, Peter scrambled onto the bed, reaching for Neal. He caught a flailing fist in the face and a knee in the groin before he managed to grab hold.

His hold was fleeting, however, as Neal’s cries increased in volume and he yanked himself free from Peter’s grasp.

“No, no no no,” he cried. “Stop, I’ll kill you, I swear I’ll kill you…”

Peter’s blood ran cold, but he didn’t let that stop him from trying again. After what seemed an eternity of grappling, he found himself laying on top of Neal, their chests smashed together, pinning his arms over his head with an iron grip.

“Neal!” he shouted. He tried to match the volume of Neal’s cries. “Neal, wake up. It’s Peter.”

Neal suddenly went still, and then he sobbed. “Okay,” he whispered. “Stop, I’ll do whatever you want, just stop…” His legs fell open, spreading to either side of Peter’s hips.

If Peter had been frightened before, it was doubled now. What was he witnessing? He closed his eyes and swallowed, afraid to even think what he was thinking. But would it really be so strange?
The work camps were notorious for having a poor control of inmate-to-inmate – and even guard-to-inmate – relations. He hated to think that Neal had been subjected to that against his will. It made him sick to his stomach.

Then again, he had also heard that private owners were using inmates as “companions.” It was another thing to hate about ESIA and its effects. Had Friedrich...

Beneath him, Neal was still crying, but he was silent and still. Peter tried again to wake him.

“Neal,” he said, softer now. “Wake up, okay? You're dreaming. You’re safe.”

He continued a steady stream of reassurances until Neal’s eyes fluttered and then opened. Tears glistened on his long lashes as he looked around wildly, his gaze finally focusing on Peter.

“There you are,” said Peter, giving him a smile. Their faces were so close together, he would have been able to feel the man’s breathing increase by the breath on his face, even if he couldn’t also feel it in the way his chest rose up and down more rapidly.

“What’s going on?” asked Neal. “What’s…” His eyes widened again, and he began to struggle once he realized he was pinned to the bed. “Peter, what are you—“

“Shhh,” said Peter. He thought about letting Neal up, but decided against it. He knew Neal was probably flashing back to being restrained in his nightmare, but he also knew the kid needed to be anchored. “You’re fine. You were going to hurt yourself, so I needed to stop you, get control.”

With what looked like extreme effort, Neal stilled again. After a minute, Peter eased up and released Neal’s wrists, but he ran a hand down Neal’s arm and rested it on his chest. When Neal started to sit up, Peter pushed him back down.

He reached over and turned on the bedside lamp. Neal was pale, his eyes red, his cheeks wet. He was shivering. Peter grabbed at the covers, which were twisted at the foot of the bed, and pulled them up to Neal’s waist.

“Stay,” he said. “Don’t move. I’ll be right back.”

Peter eased off the bed and exited the room. Elizabeth was standing just outside, wrapped in a blue robe, her hair tangled and her eyes wide with worry.

“Is he okay?” she asked softly.

“I honestly don’t know,” said Peter, rubbing a hand over his face. “Can you go in and sit with him a minute? I’m going to go down and make him some tea. He’s shaking like a leaf.”

“Of course,” she said. She stepped forward and wrapped her arms around him, and he buried his nose in her neck, breathing deeply.

“Be careful what you say,” he murmured. “I’ll bring back the signal jammer too, but until then…”

“Got it,” she said. “Small talk only.”

He tightened his arms around her. “Hon, I think I’ve got to stay with him again. For the foreseeable future. This isn’t getting better.”

He felt her nod. “It’s okay,” she said. "Do you think it would help if I stayed too?"

Thinking about it, he shook his head. "No, he's too physical. I don't want you to get hurt."
"Let me know if you change your mind," she said. "But do what you need to do."

Pulling back, he examined her face. “You sure? Because I miss you like crazy.”

“I miss you too, but this is more important. Now, go get that tea. There’s some chamomile in the pantry, don’t make anything with caffeine.” She released him and pushed him towards the stairs.

“I’m not a complete idiot,” he mumbled, with a roll of his eye.

Ten minutes later, he re-entered the guest room with a steaming mug of tea and the signal jammer – turned on – in his pocket.

Neal was sitting up in bed, propped against the pillows. Elizabeth was curled up next to him, holding one of his hands in hers. Neal looked a little better. His cheeks had been dried, and his eyes looked slightly less puffed.

“It’s about confidence,” he was saying. “Like anything. Confidence will carry you through.”

“I’m sure it’s not that easy,” said Elizabeth, laughing.

“Well, no. You’d have to practice. But ultimately…confidence. I could teach you.”

“Could you really?” She sounded delighted.

Peter entered the room and cleared his throat. “Teach her what?” he asked, frowning at them. Elizabeth had the decency to look momentarily guilty. Neal simply grinned up at him, his eyes regaining their sparkle.

“Nothing, hon,” said Elizabeth.

Peter snorted. He’d get it out of her later. He held out the steaming mug towards Neal. “Here,” he said. “This should help you get back to sleep.”

Neal eyed it. “Is it laced with sleeping pills?”

“No, just chamomile. But if you want something, we probably have an over-the-counter you could try.”

Neal shook his head. “No thanks. The tea should be fine. I appreciate it, Peter.” He leaned forward and reached out, losing his balance slightly. Peter used his other hand to steady Neal’s shoulder, and, once he was balanced again, Neal took the mug.

Then he turned to Elizabeth and opened his other palm, revealing the signal jammer.

“See?” he said. “Confidence.”

Peter patted the pocket of his pajama pants, where the jammer had just been, and found it empty. He rolled his eyes.

“How did you even know that was in there?” he asked.

Neal took a sip of the tea. “I just know you that well,” he said.

“Neal…”

“Elizabeth told me you were going to get it. Relax, Peter. Just a harmless demonstration.”
Peter wasn’t angry. He wasn’t even annoyed, or exasperated. He was mainly glad Neal seemed to be feeling in better spirits. That, or he was masking it well, which was equally likely.

Elizabeth stood. “All right, boys,” she said. “It’s late, so I’m going to go back to bed. Call if you need anything.” She leaned down and kissed Neal’s cheek, then came around the bed to say goodnight to Peter.

“Night, hon,” said Peter. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

She waved and left. Peter turned back to Neal, who was frowning.

“You’re not going with her?” he asked.

“Nope.” Peter sat on the bed. “I’m staying here.”

“Peter, I don’t want—“

“It doesn’t matter,” said Peter. “Listen, I get it. You don’t want to need me here, but you do. So I’m staying. Get used to it.”

“I don’t need to be babysat,” said Neal. He sounded uncomfortable.

“Yeah, you do. I’d offer to let El stay, but I’m worried you’d end up punching her, too.”

Neal’s head jerked up, and he looked at Peter. Realization dawned on his features. He reached out a hand to Peter’s cheek, hesitating a moment, then laying his warm fingers on the slight bruise that had begun to darken Peter’s cheekbone.

“Did I do that?” he asked.

“Yup.”

Neal snatched his hand away and his face fell. “I’m sorry. God, I’m sorry. See? This is why you should just close the door and ignore me. Maybe I should take the sleeping pills.”

“I can handle it.” Peter pulled the covers back and slid underneath, leaning his back against the headboard. “I’m more worried you’ll end up hurting yourself if I’m not here. You’re not even close to healed from those Justice Facility restraints.”

Neal set the empty mug on the bedside table. He glanced at Peter. “Aside from the risk of punching, you’d trust me with Elizabeth?”

The question surprised Peter. He hadn’t honestly thought about it. He had considered offering to Neal that El stay with him instead, since he seemed so resistant to Peter, but had dismissed it because of the physical danger.

He realized that he did trust Neal with Elizabeth.

“I trust her with you. Also, when you heard about the surveillance, the first thing you did was worry about her safety. That won you brownie points.”

Neal chuckled and slid down until his head was on the pillow and the covers were pulled up to his chin. “Well, I guess that’s something. I am sorry about punching you.”

“You didn’t do it on purpose,” said Peter. He switched off the lamp, plunging the room into darkness, then slid down beside Neal. His left hand brushed against Neal’s leg. Neal didn’t pull
away, and Peter left his hand where it had landed.

“I’ll try not to do it again,” said Neal. He sounded sleepy. Maybe the tea had done its job.

“You were in the middle of a nightmare,” said Peter. “Reliving something, no doubt because we found out Friedrich might be spying on us. I get it. It makes you feel more vulnerable, and that comes out in your subconscious as you sleep.”

“Mmmm,” murmured Neal noncommittally.

“Neal, I wish you’d just tell me what happened to you.”

There was a long stretch of silence, and Peter thought perhaps Neal had fallen asleep. But then, he rolled away from Peter and spoke, one definite word.

“No.”

“It might help. Both the case, and…it might just help you to talk about it.”

“Peter, no,” said Neal. He was almost whispering, his voice was pitched so low. “I’m not going to talk about it, not unless I absolutely have to. Maybe not even then. So you can stop asking.”

Peter sighed. He wasn’t planning to stop asking, but it was clear he wasn’t getting anywhere that night.

“Fine,” he said. Then he rolled toward Neal, and threw his right arm over, pulling Neal against him.

Neal stiffened slightly. “Peter—“

“Shut up,” said Peter. “You need to know I’m here.”

Neal was still for a minute, but then let out a slow breath and began to relax. Peter could feel his muscles releasing, one by one, as he drifted towards sleep. Eventually, his breathing was deep and even. Peter tightened his hold and tried to relax into sleep himself.

He tried not to think about how, this third night in a row, he was already starting to get used to this sleeping arrangement. To being wrapped around the conman he used to love chasing, and feeling like it made sense in some strange, unexplainable way.

He tried not to think about how he was starting to get used to Neal. And how he would feel if they failed, and Neal was taken away from him.

He clenched his jaw, and screwed his eyes shut. *Not going to happen*, he thought. *Not on my watch.*
Chapter Nineteen: Truth and Suggestion

Monday, June 28, 8:10AM

Neal had built his life on finding creative ways to avoid outright lies. He didn’t mind lying, and did it well when necessary, but he much preferred using the truth to shape or contain his lies. It was easier to remember, and easier to wiggle out of if you were discovered. Too many cons were tripped up by spinning tangled webs of falsehoods, and Neal had decided long ago that partial truth – and avoidance – was the smarter way to play.

Which was why – as Peter cleared the breakfast dishes on Monday morning – Neal was attempting to figure out whether and how to bring up the subject of Kate. Peter would have questions Neal didn’t want to answer, and didn’t want to lie about. On the one hand, Peter could help him find Kate. On the other, he might become suspicious that Neal intended to run and look for her. And he needed Peter to trust him if their arrangement was going to work at all.

“You’re thinking awfully hard,” observed Elizabeth, watching him over the top of her coffee cup. “Anything I can help you with?”

Neal relaxed his features into an easy smile. “Nothing important,” he said.

“You sure? Sometimes it helps to talk things out.” She set her cup on the table and leaned forward, resting her chin on her palm. She didn’t say anything else, just waited.

Neal could hear Peter moving around in the kitchen. The water turned on. He was probably rinsing...
the dishes to put into the dishwasher. Maybe Elizabeth could help, without even knowing she was helping. He reached out and flipped on the signal jammer that sat in the center of the table. They had been keeping it off as much as possible, so as not to alert whoever was listening that they were onto him.

“I’m looking for someone,” he said, keeping his voice hushed.

Elizabeth glanced towards the door to the kitchen. “And you don’t want Peter to know?”

“It’s not that. He knows, sort of.”

“Sort of?”

“I mentioned it the first day he came to see me in – where I was.” Neal rubbed a hand over his face. Elizabeth needed to see that this was difficult for him, but also believe he was being honest with her. Which he was. Sort of.

Elizabeth sat back. “But you think he may not remember, and if he does, that he may not approve.”

“Exactly,” said Neal. “I’m not doing anything wrong, I swear. But Peter might be worried that looking for this person isn’t the best idea I’ve ever had. The thing is, I can’t not look for her.”

He dropped the information that it was a her he was looking for, hoping Elizabeth would be intrigued. He wasn’t disappointed. Her eyes lit up, and she smiled.

“Is this person special to you?” asked Elizabeth softly.

“Oh yeah,” said Neal. “Definitely.”

“Then you should look for her. I bet if you told him, Peter would help. He’s got resources you don’t have.”

Neal dropped his eyes, twisted his hands in his lap. “Maybe,” he said.

“You want me to ask him?”

Neal grinned at her with his most pleased and hopeful expression. “You would do that?”

She nodded. “I’ll mention it,” she said. She got to her feet, smoothing out her dress. “But Neal, next time? Just ask me for the help. You don’t have to con me.” She winked, then took her coffee cup into the kitchen.

He watched her go, unable to keep his mouth from dropping open. He had been underestimating Elizabeth. That was twice in two days now that he thought he was putting one over on the Burkes, and they had seen right through him. He must be losing his touch.

That, or they were both just as good as he was. The thought made Neal smile, and he couldn’t explain why.

The kitchen door swung open, and Peter appeared, followed by his wife.

“What time is your little friend coming to do his…cleaning?” asked Peter, settling back at the table. He had two fresh cups of coffee, and slid one across the table to Neal. Neal took it and sniffed with appreciation. The Burkes made damned good coffee.

“She’s not big on schedules,” said Neal. “He doesn’t like to be that predictable. But he said he’d
come by this morning. Could be anytime.” Neal slid his burner phone out of his pocket and checked. Nothing from Mozzie. When they had talked the night before, Mozzie had reluctantly agreed to help after a lot of fast-talking on Neal’s part.

“This is only for you, Ne – Halden,” said Mozzie. “And be ready. You probably won’t recognize me.”

Neal bit back a snort of laughter. Mozzie wasn’t that great at disguises. His ability to blend in was better than his ability to actually look like someone else. But all he said was, “Thanks, Haversham.”

Peter glanced at his watch and grunted. “Doesn’t like schedules,” he muttered. “Fine. While we’re waiting, why don’t you tell me what you’ve already found out about Kate Moreau?”

Neal’s eyes widened. He tried to cover it up, but Peter had already seen the reaction. He rolled his eyes.

“El mentioned you needed my help finding someone. Who else would you be searching for? You think I didn’t look into that as soon as I left the Justice Facility that morning? Kate comes to see you on an almost-weekly basis for over four years. Then one day she stops coming, and you put your Contract up for Sale. I didn’t need eighteen weeks of Quantico to figure that out. Not to mention she’s the whole reason I managed to catch you in the first place.”

Peter grinned at Neal, and Neal sighed. The man knew him better than he wanted to admit, and was proving it over and over again. He pulled the burner phone out of his pocket, pulled up the ATM photo, and handed it across the table to Peter. Peter frowned at it, then handed it back.

“Where did you get that?” he asked.

“From…a friend,” said Neal. “It’s an ATM security photo from a few days ago in San Diego. That’s all I’ve got.”

“What else have you been poking at, and how?” asked Peter.

“I haven’t,” said Neal. When Peter’s eyes narrowed, Neal raised up his hands, palms out. “I swear, Peter. A couple of quick Internet searches for messages in some of the places she might leave something for me to see. There was nothing. Otherwise, I asked a friend for help, and this is all he’s come up with.”

“Send it to me,” said Peter. “I’ll see what I can do. You stay away from it.”

“Why?”

“Because it might get you into trouble, honey.” Elizabeth had been watching them quietly, but now she reached over and rested a manicured hand on Neal’s arm. “You have to lay as low as possible right now. Let Peter look into it.”

Neal hesitated, and then nodded. He didn’t actually have to stop looking, he reasoned. Elizabeth had told him to “let Peter look into it,” and that was what he was nodding in agreement to. Nothing more.

Peter looked like he was about to say something else, and then the doorbell rang. Elizabeth started to get up, but he motioned for her to stay.

“I’ll get it,” he said. “It’s probably our expected visitor. Neal?” He gestured for Neal to accompany
him.

When Peter opened the door, it was all Neal could do not to burst out laughing. Mozzie was
wearing a dark blue jumpsuit emblazoned with a yellow telephone company logo, but it was the
rest of the get-up that was ridiculous. He was wearing giant mirrored sunglasses, and a wig of
frizzy blond mullet-hair peeked out the back of a grungy red and white baseball cap with the slogan
*Ask Me About the Third Gunman* in bold letters on the front.

Peter did a double-take, then shot a glance at Neal. Neal shrugged.

“Can I help you?” asked Peter dryly.

“I think it is *I* who can help *you*, Suit,” said Mozzie. “Can I come in, or are we going to have a
party on your front stoop?”

Peter stepped aside and let Mozzie enter. Mozzie’s head swiveled, taking in his surroundings.

“Peter,” said Neal, “this is—“


Neal tried not to roll his eyes and was almost successful. “Haversham, this is Special Agent Peter
Burke.”

“Pleasure,” said Mozzie, ignoring Peter’s proffered hand. “Can we speak freely?”

Elizabeth, who had been hovering at the threshold of the living room, stepped forward. She held
up the signal jammer. “At the moment, yes,” she said. “Can you help us figure out if someone is
watching and listening?”

“Does the sting of a bullet ant hurt like a bitch?”

Neal and Peter and Elizabeth looked at each other. Peter shrugged.

“It does,” said Mozzie. “And I already have helped. I found two cameras outside and put them on a
loop. Whoever is watching will figure it out eventually, but hopefully it’ll take him a while.”

“You found cameras?” asked Peter. His voice was grim, as though he hadn’t really believed there
was anything to worry about until that moment.

“In the trees across the street,” said Mozzie. “Very high quality. Could see right into the front
windows.”

Elizabeth shuddered. “How will we know if he fixes them?” she asked.

“I set up a camera of my own. To watch the watchers,” said Mozzie. “Thought you might want to
be stealthy about letting them know we know. Don’t worry, Mrs. Suit. If there’s anything else in
here to find, I’ll find it.”

Peter gazed at Mozzie, and then nodded. “Okay,” he said. “You clearly know what you’re doing.”

Mozzie pulled something out of his pocket and tossed it to Peter, who caught it.

“Found that in your car,” he said.

*In my car?” asked Peter, examining the small bug. “How did you get* in—“
“Neal?” Mozzie folded his arms across his chest.

“No questions, Peter. Remember?”

Peter let out a snort of frustration. “Fine,” he said. “Do what you need to do.” He looked like he planned to follow Mozzie around, but then his phone rang. Peter waved at Neal to watch his friend before he answered.

Mozzie pulled a strange-looking device out of his duffel bag and turned it on. It began emitting high-pitched beeps, and Mozzie waved it around, listening intently. He moved towards the dining room. Neal was torn between following Mozzie and staying by Peter, but Elizabeth moved closer to Mozzie, asking him about the device, so Neal stayed put.

“This is Burke,” Peter was saying. “Margaret. Is there…I see. What time?” He paused, frowning, the muscles in his neck going taut. “No, we knew to expect that. Okay, I’ll meet you there.” Another pause. “No, I think it’s best if we keep him away from this until directed otherwise, don’t you?”

*Keep who away from what?* Neal wondered. Him, probably.

“Right. Well, he’s not planning to do that, not if he doesn’t have to, and I don’t blame him.” Another pause. “I have tried. I’ll keep trying. But for now…yeah. Exactly. Okay, two o’clock. See you then.”

Peter hung up the phone and turned around, eyes narrowing again when he spotted Neal.

“Why aren’t you watching Haversham?” he asked.

Neal ignored the question. “What’s happening at two o’clock?” he asked.

Peter stepped to his right, watching Mozzie and Elizabeth disappear through the back door into the yard. “Later. We need to make sure--”

“He’s not going to do anything. What’s happening at two o’clock?” Neal stepped to his left so he was directly in front of Peter. “Tell me.”

“How do you know he’s not going to do anything?” asked Peter. “He’s a little...he’s--”

“An oddball. But he’s not going to hurt Elizabeth, and he’s not going to steal from you.”

Peter focused on Neal and raised an eyebrow. “How do you know? He seems...unstable.”

Neal shook his head. “He knows how precarious my situation is, and he’d never do anything to jeopardize this.” Neal waved his hand between himself and Peter. “If he does anything, you could change your mind about the Forced Sale and send me back. He won’t be responsible for that.”

Peter folded his arms across his chest and raised his gaze to the back door. He frowned, then sighed and focused on Neal again. “He’s actually your friend, isn’t he?” he asked. “You trust him.”

Neal rolled his eyes. “Yes, Peter. I have actual friends. Of which he is one. And I trust him to behave himself this morning and to do a good job. Now, *what is happening at two o’clock?”*

“All right.” Peter gestured to the sofa. “Let’s sit down.”

A bolt of fear shot through Neal’s stomach. If Peter wanted him to sit, then whatever it was, it couldn’t be good. He stood his ground. “Just tell me.”
Peter paused. “Neal, I really think you should--”

Neal reached out and laid a hand on Peter’s bicep, gripping tight. “I’m not going to break, Peter. I’m not that fragile.”

“I know you’re not,” said Peter. He clasped his other hand over Neal’s, and some of the tension evaporated from Neal’s neck at the warmth of the touch. “If prison didn’t break you, and Friedrich didn’t break you, and the goddamned Justice Facility didn’t break you, I don’t suppose there’s much that would.”

Neal swallowed. Prison may not have broken him, but Friedrich definitely had. He was still trying to put the pieces together. Peter had to know that, from the nightmares Neal was having. But then again, if he didn’t, Neal had no intention of clueing him in.

“So tell me what’s going on,” he said, after a moment.

Not responding directly to Peter’s comment wasn’t lying. Not really. He’d just let Peter believe what he wanted to believe.

Peter squeezed his hand, but didn’t let it go. Neal had a fleeting thought that it should feel weird, having his hand just sitting on Peter’s arm like that, with Peter’s hand covering his, but it didn’t. He liked the solidness of the muscle underneath the fabric of Peter’s shirt. He liked the warmth of contact, surrounding him, since he realized his hands had gone cold as soon as Peter picked up the phone.

“Okay,” said Peter. “It’s nothing that’s a surprise. We were anticipating this. But that was Margaret Beechwood. The hearing, the one set for Friday? It’s been moved up to this afternoon. Friedrich claims it’s a matter of security and urgency.”

If Neal’s hands were cold before, it was nothing compared to how his entire body felt at Peter’s words. He shivered involuntarily, and Peter automatically moved closer, moving his hand to Neal’s shoulder.

“Hey. It’s going to be fine,” Peter said.

“Sure,” Neal managed. He wrenched free of Peter’s grip and crossed the living room until he could brace himself against the fireplace, his back to the room. After what he had told Peter about not breaking, he wasn’t about to be proven wrong. He just needed a second, and the cold brick under his palms was the perfect thing to hold him up.

“I mean it, Neal,” said Peter. “We knew this was coming. Doesn’t really matter if it’s today or later in the week. In fact, I think it’s kind of good.”

“Yeah? How?”

“You’ve been out for all of two and a half days -- much of which you’ve been in severe recovery -- and you somehow still managed to get us the biggest break on the Dutchman case since I started working on it months ago. We can do a lot with that in Court.”

Neal nodded. He concentrated on breathing in and out. What Peter was saying made sense. And yet, it didn’t change the fact that, if they lost that afternoon, he could be back at the Justice Facility that evening, awaiting his fate same as before.

He jumped when he felt a palm on the center of his back. Peter had approached without him realizing it. Neal didn’t move. He was afraid that if he did, or if he spoke, he’d reveal just how
“That’s good,” said Peter. “Just breathe. I promise this is going to be okay. Even if -- and it’s a big if -- even if the Judge reconsiders her ruling on the conditional release, you won’t go back to the conditions you were in before. Beechwood is a hundred percent certain on that. At most, you’d be in a cell. Not...not like it was before.”

Neal tried to take comfort in that, but it wasn’t helping, not really. Peter seemed to be able to tell, because he kept rubbing Neal’s back, and he kept talking.

“And I’m going to do my best to not even let that happen,” he said. “Beechwood is confident. We’ve got the same Judge. We know what Friedrich will say -- that you’re dangerous, that he has a right to determine what to do with his property, etc. -- but we’ve got good arguments to counter all of that.”

“Will I have to testify?” Neal managed. He didn’t like how shaky his voice sounded, but he needed to know. Was he going to have to talk about what had happened?

“No,” said Peter. “In fact, you’re not coming.”

Neal raised his head finally, whipped his gaze around to Peter. “What?”

“No need. Margaret and I agreed; it would be difficult for you, and it’s not necessary. Safer for you to stay here, with Elizabeth.”

Neal thought. On the one hand, this was his case. He had a right to be there. Then again, technically, he had no rights, so that wasn’t true. And what Peter had said made sense. He wasn’t sure if he was ready to look Friedrich in the eyes again.

Besides, if he wasn’t there, and they lost, there was a chance he could figure out how to run before anyone came to take him back to the Justice Facility. If only he could manage to get some alone time with Mozzie to make some plans.

Neal took one last breath and straightened up, pushing away from the fireplace. He turned, dislodging Peter’s hand, and looked Peter in the eye. “You’re right,” he said. “I don’t want to be there.”

Peter watched him a moment, then smiled. “Good. But Neal...now is not the time to run.”

_Damn, Peter could read him like a children’s book._ Neal put on his best baffled look.

“What are you talking about?” he asked.

“Don’t even pretend you weren’t just considering it,” said Peter. “We’re going to win today. And remember, even if we lose, it’s just on the conditional release. It’s not on the Forced Sale. We won’t lose that.”

“And if we do?” asked Neal.

“If we do...just trust me. _Now_ is not the time to run.”

Neal considered Peter’s answer. If he was reading Peter right, Peter was telling him that, when the time _was_ right to run, Peter would support that. Neal nearly sat on the floor at the realization. The great, law-abiding Peter Burke, suggesting that if it looked bleak, he wouldn’t blame Neal for running.
Play your cards right and he might even help, thought Neal, and then immediately felt ashamed for thinking it. Peter had been nothing but supportive. He owed him an ounce of faith.

Which didn’t mean he couldn’t make plans.

“I get it,” said Neal. “Stay the course.”

“Exactly.” Peter smiled and clapped Neal on the shoulder, satisfied that he understood.

Neal nodded, and couldn’t help but focus on the way Peter’s hand remained on his shoulder, squeezing slightly. Peter just kept touching him, and it was equal parts welcome and disconcerting.

On the one hand, Neal was comfortable being physical with other people. He had to be. It was all part of the conman’s charm, the little touches and points of contact that put people at ease. He was used to evoking responses in others with touch.

On the other hand, Neal wasn’t so comfortable with the way he was responding to being touched by Peter. He flashed back momentarily to that morning.

Neal had opened his eyes slowly, once again cocooned in warmth and strength. This time, he wasn’t confused. He knew immediately, even through his sleep-fogged brain, that he was draped across Peter, that it was Peter wrapped around him and making him feel safe and content.

He listened to Peter’s deep, even breathing, and knew the man was still asleep. He took advantage of that, snuggling closer and burying his face in Peter’s chest. The solidness of it, combined with the warmth, gave him the security he sought.

Peter’s arms, which were wrapped around Neal, tightened briefly, and then one hand began stroking slowly up and down Neal’s arm. Neal held back a sigh as long as he could, but when the movement continued, he couldn’t help release it, his entire body relaxing into Peter.

He felt movement, and realized that Peter was shifting his head, turning slightly towards Neal.

There was something else, too. Something that Neal had felt several times now, since being in Peter’s house. He felt himself stirring, his body showing interest beyond just comfort. He swallowed, screwing his eyes shut, and was careful not to move a muscle. After a few minutes of breathing deeply, he extricated himself from Peter’s grip. Peter continued to sleep.

The shower didn’t bring him relief – he hadn’t expected that it would – but it gave him time to get himself back under control. By the time Peter appeared downstairs, Neal had shoved it into the back of his mind.

Now, with Peter’s hand on him, the feelings were flooding back. Neal tried to rationalize it. It wasn’t like a guy had never turned him on before, and Peter was attractive. He liked Peter. It wasn’t all that strange that being in close physical contact with Peter made him feel that attraction.

But Neal was positive that Peter wasn’t gay. More than that, he was married. And if things went well, he was going to own Neal, and that…complicated everything. Especially after Friedrich.

Thinking about Friedrich was like getting a bucket of cold water dumped on his head. He shivered.

“You all right?” asked Peter. “You can trust me on this. I’m not going to let them take you back. I promise.”

Neal closed his eyes. He wanted to trust Peter. He did trust Peter, had immediately. He just wasn’t
sure Peter had it in his power to promise this particular thing. He shook it off, pasted a smile on, and carefully avoided responding to Peter’s question.

“Let’s check on Haversham,” he said. “Make sure he hasn’t conned Elizabeth into handing over your bank account numbers.”

Peter’s eyes widened, and Neal couldn’t help it. He reached out and patted him on the cheek. “Kidding, kidding,” he said. “Mostly.”

He turned and led the way to the backyard. He heard Peter’s snort of laughter behind him, and tried to focus on that, and not on what would happen in Court that afternoon.

It would be fine. Peter had promised.
Chapter Summary

Neal tries to explain his circumstances to Mozzie; Peter heads to Court.

Chapter Notes

I'm back!

Thank you for your patience as I untangled myself from the super-busy job/life fiasco. I'm hoping to have a series of frequent updates for a while to make up for the delay.

Hope you enjoy!

Chapter 20: Distracted

Monday, June 28, 12:10PM

If there was one thing Neal was a true expert at – and he was good at many things – it was ignoring things that were troubling to him. He could compartmentalize with the best of them. It was what had gotten him this far. After all, if he spent too much time dwelling on the moral ambiguity of a situation, rather than choosing the interpretation that suited him best and hurt the fewest innocent people, he would never be able to move forward with a con.

The key was distraction.

At the moment, Neal was distracting himself by watching Mozzie scan his bedroom for bugs. The man had found bugs on several window ledges and the picnic table outside. He had not, thankfully, found anything inside yet, meaning that either Friedrich hadn’t been able to get into the house or hadn’t attempted it yet.

After a few minutes, Mozzie glanced at the door, and closed it almost all the way, careful not to let it latch. He turned back to Neal and looked at him searchingly. When he spoke, his voice was pitched low, almost a whisper.

“Tell me the truth, Neal,” he said. “How bad is it?”

Neal blinked at Mozzie, trying to read between the lines. How bad was what? Trying not to dwell on the fact that a crucial hearing that would decide on your freedom was going to take place without you being there to influence it? Knowing that you could, at any moment, be taken to await your execution? Being collared and tied to the FBI agent who had put you in this situation in the first place?

Or realizing that, despite the circumstances, you sort of liked being where you were?

Neal chose the most obvious. “It’s not that bad,” said Neal. “Really,” he added, at Mozzie’s
skeptical gaze. “Peter’s a good guy, and he’s not treating me like…a slave.”

“You’re wearing a shock collar,” Mozzie pointed out. “Seems slave-like to me.”

Neal acknowledged the point with a nod followed by a shrug. “It’s the rules,” he said. “But he isn’t limiting me more than he has to. The Court – and, apparently, Friedrich – are watching us. So he can’t just say, ‘okay, Neal, go on out and have fun.’”

“He could let you go,” said Mozzie. “If he was really a good guy, he could unlock the collar and look the other way.”

Neal thought back to what Peter had implied that morning – that, if it came down to it, he would do that very thing. But he couldn’t tell Mozzie that, so he just shook his head, and said, “No, he can’t. It would destroy his career. And before you suggest it, I’m not going to try to run – not that it’s possible at the moment anyway – unless it’s absolutely necessary. I can’t do that to Peter.”

As soon as he said it, he knew it was true. He wasn’t going anywhere. Yet, he reminded himself.

Mozzie let out a disgusted sputter. “Of course, his career is more important to him than your life. Listen to yourself, Neal. You’ve already gone full-on Stockholm.”

You have no idea, thought Neal, but then regretted even the thought. Peter wasn’t his jailer, not really. They were…he didn’t know exactly what. Friends? Becoming friends? And maybe he had already gone Stockholm before this started, back when Peter was chasing him. If so, then this was just a continuation of that. Whatever it was, it was complicated.

He smiled at Mozzie, who clearly had his best interests at heart. Neal just needed him to understand that the danger Neal was currently in was not coming from Peter, and that Peter was maybe the only thing standing in danger’s way.

“Look, Peter didn’t have to start this process at all,” he said. “He didn’t have to get me out of the Justice Facility. He didn’t have to put his finances and his safety and his reputation at his job on the line…for me. I’m nobody to him, and yet he did this. You don’t know what it was like in there, before he showed up and just took over, offered me a lifeline. He…”

Neal stopped and swallowed hard. He had to stay in control here.

“Neal, you’re not nobody to him, otherwise—“

Neal held up a hand. “I’m grateful to him for even trying. I’m not going to repay that debt by ditching before he’s had a chance to try to help without screwing up his life and more than I have already.”

Mozzie groaned. “You’re screwed, man,” he said. “When you start feeling compassion for your captor, it’s all over.” But then he smiled, and Neal could tell he was dropping the conversation, at least for now. “Hey, you want me to leave some equipment? After I leave, you should periodically sweep the room again. Make sure the Suit hasn’t put his own bugs in here to watch you.”

Neal rolled his eyes. “Not likely,” he said. “He watches me like a hawk already. He doesn’t need spy equipment to monitor me.”

“He’s not in here when you sleep,” said Mozzie. “He might set up a camera to make sure you aren’t snooping on his computer or something. Unless he…does he chain you up at night?”

Neal made a face. “No! Mozzie, I told you, Peter isn’t like that. He’s not…he’s not buying my
contract so he can be a typical owner. He’s doing it because he thinks it’s the right thing to do.”

*Not to mention the fact that he doesn’t actually need to chain me up at night, not when he sleeps wrapped around me*, thought Neal. He decided it was best that Mozzie not know about that. Yet, if ever.

“Well, if you say so. Still, I can come back in a day or so and check again, without them being the wiser.”

Neal smiled affectionately at his friend. “I’ll let you know.”

He was about to ask Mozzie if he had found anything else on Kate when he heard Peter’s voice rising up from the first floor.

“Neal!” called Peter.

Neal thought about shouting *What?* back, but decided against it. He gestured to Mozzie to keep working, and jogged down the stairs. Peter was shrugging into his suit jacket.

“There you are,” said Peter. “Listen, I’m about to go. I want to stop by the office before I head over there.”

*To court.* A chill sped down Neal’s spine, but he just nodded. “Good luck,” he said.

Peter frowned. “It’ll be okay,” he said.

“I know,” said Neal. “At the very least, I’ll go into lockup somewhere, but not like it was.” He moved around to stand behind Peter, and brushed at the material over his shoulders, and down his back, smoothing out any minute creases in the jacket. He needed a little physical contact to steady himself, but not too much, and running his fingers over the hard, comforting planes of Peter’s muscles was just the thing.

Peter stilled as Neal adjusted his jacket further. When Neal was done, Peter turned to face him caught his eye. “I’m going to do my best not to even let that happen,” he said. “I promise.”

When Neal forced a smile onto his face, Peter reached up and ruffled his hair. Neal ducked out of the way. Too much contact.

“Peter, I know,” he said. “Call when it’s done.”

“Will do. El has something for you to do while I’m gone.”

Neal narrowed his eyes. Chores? But Peter was still talking.

“I thought about telling her that you should stay put, less temptation to try to take off.”

“Peter—“

Peter held up a hand. “But you told me you wouldn’t, that you’d trust me, so...have fun. She’ll be in control of the radius, make sure you stay close.”

*Have fun?* What was Elizabeth up to? Neal wondered.

“I appreciate that, Peter,” said Neal. “Go, I’m fine.”

Peter reached out again, and cupped his hand on the back of Neal’s neck. He didn’t take it any
further, didn’t pull Neal in for a hug, just rested his fingers there, warm and sure. With one last nod, Peter released him and left. Neal looked around the living room, not sure what he should do next. Just as he was deciding to retire back to his bedroom and Mozzie, Elizabeth entered from the kitchen.

“Did he go?” she asked. Neal nodded. “Good. Your friend will be okay here on his own, right? I’m anxious to get going.”

“Get going where?” asked Neal.

Elizabeth grinned. “It’s a surprise,” she said. “Go get dressed up, meet me back here in fifteen minutes. Tell Mr. Haversham to be on his best behavior and that I have a log of all of my jewelry, even the cheap pieces.”

Neal headed upstairs to don his suit, wondering just what type of distraction Elizabeth had in mind.

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Monday, June 28, 1:30PM

Peter arrived at the courthouse early. He was anxious, more than usual, so he took advantage of the extra time and looped the block twice, working off some of his extra energy, before climbing the steps between the massive stone columns and pulling open the tall wooden doors.

He liked courthouses, most of the time. Of course, most of the time that was because being in a courthouse meant that he had caught the criminal and was going to testify and put the guy -- or girl -- away, closing the books on a successful case.

Today, the cavernous marble interior of the halls of justice felt imposing and intimidating rather than comforting. He supposed that was because today, he was on the defense instead of the offense. He pushed the negative thoughts aside. He had to focus. Neal was counting on him.

He allowed himself a moment to think about Neal that morning. The look on his face when he realized the hearing was happening...Peter felt his chest tighten at the memory. The thinly-veiled panic in his deep blue eyes, the shiver that Neal had tried to suppress, the tension in his back when Peter had placed a hand on him, and the way he had slowly relaxed into Peter’s touch…

Peter shook his head and collected himself. It was time to keep his promise to Neal.

Peter made his way through security and to the elevator bank. He found the courtroom and settled himself on the big wooden bench just outside the heavy oaken doors. He rested his hands on his thighs and tried to settle his nerves.

Margaret Beechwood swept around the corner, heels clicking authoritatively on the marble floors. She flashed Peter a confident smile.

“Ready?” she asked, pausing beside him.

He stood, wiping his palms on his trousers. When had they begun to sweat?

“I think so,” he said.

“It’ll be just what we talked about,” she said. “I’ll make our argument. Because Friedrich is likely to contest the conditional release, the judge may want to hear from you about how you’re keeping Neal, and how secure he is outside of the Justice Facility – will he be able to take off, or will he
stay put, that kind of thing. She’ll want you to talk about what you intend for him once the contract is purchased, so remember to focus on value.”

“Right,” said Peter. “Value. No problem. Speaking of which, there have been developments on the case Neal is working on, and—”

“Already?” asked Margaret.

Peter smiled, proud. “Already. Neal’s good, I’m telling you. But I can’t release that information to Friedrich and his lawyers. Is there any way I could talk to the judge about the case in private?”

Margaret pursed her lips. “Probably. We can certainly ask, but it’s a reasonable request and the information itself is irrelevant to Friedrich.”

“Good.”

Margaret hesitated, and then said, “She may also want you to talk about the conditions in which he was being held at the Justice Facility, get some of that on the record. It’s in the brief from the initial filing, but since you were there…”

Peter nodded. He flashed back to an image of Neal in the Justice Facility, and the condition he had been in when Peter had found him. He swallowed.

Now Margaret was eyeing him. “You going to be okay to talk about this?” she asked softly.

“Of course,” said Peter. He cleared his throat, since his voice sounded gruffer than he intended. “I’m fine. Done this kind of thing a million times.”

She watched him a moment, and then, seemingly satisfied, she turned to enter the courtroom.

Their steps were silent on the carpet on the other side of the doors, and Peter had the odd sense that even his breathing was too loud in the hushed space. There was no one in the gallery. It was just rows of empty, polished wooden benches.

There were only two people in the room: the clerk, who sat at his small desk in front of the judge’s bench, shuffling papers around, and the court reporter, who was setting up his stenographer equipment. They both glanced up when Peter and Margaret walked in.

“Hello,” the clerk called. “Burke v. Friedrich?”

Margaret led the way down the center aisle to the front of the courtroom.

“Yes. I represent Peter Burke, the plaintiff,” she said. She motioned over her shoulder for Peter to join her at the small conference table on the left, where she began spreading out a sheaf of papers. “Are we the first ones here?”

Before the clerk could respond, the door at the rear of the room swung open. Peter looked over his shoulder and watched as two men in dark, expensive suits and carrying leather briefcases strode up the center aisle, exuding arrogance and confidence. Their faces were set in deep frowns, and they didn’t even glance in Peter and Margaret’s direction.

“Friedrich is present and ready,” one barked at the clerk. The clerk raised an eyebrow at the lawyer’s tone, but stood and exited through the door to the judge’s chambers.

Sure enough, behind the two lawyers was Carl Friedrich. Like the other two men, he was dressed
in a dark, expensive-looking suit. Unlike the others, he was sauntering casually forward, typing on his phone as if he had not a care in the world.

Seeing the man again caused a physical reaction that Peter had not expected. His gut clenched, and then turned cold. He felt his breathing and heart rate increase, and his right hand curled into a fist.

This was the man who had subjected Neal to torture. This was the man who was willing to extinguish a life – Neal’s life – without a second thought. This was the man who Peter wanted to beat until he was broken and bloody and pleading for mercy.

The intensity with which Peter focused on these thoughts nearly knocked him over. He liked to think of himself as a compassionate man, someone who could feel empathy for and sympathy towards people in need. He tried to help where he could, not turn away from suffering. But the way he was reacting to Neal’s suffering, at the hands of Friedrich, that was new.

The only time Peter could ever remember feeling anything close to similar was when Elizabeth had gotten into a conflict with a man in a store back when they were first dating. She had been looking at ties while Peter tried on a suit, and when he came out of the dressing room the man was looming over Elizabeth, using his height to intimidate her. The ferocity of Peter’s reaction that day – he shoved his body between the man and Elizabeth in the blink of an eye, jaw hard and eyes dangerous – had scared him then, too.

Peter thought about Neal. It was deceptive, the depth at which he felt he knew Neal after years of studying him and predicting his moves. On the one hand, he could anticipate how Neal would react to various stimuli. On the other, he knew almost nothing of the details of Neal’s early life, or even what was really going on in his head.

That last bit was what Peter had realized in the past few days, while he had been so hyper-focused on the younger man. In these few days, Peter was learning. Learning the different ways Neal would smile, depending on whether he was genuinely pleased or delighted, attempting to entertain, to cover up an injury, to please Peter or Elizabeth. He was learning the way Neal’s voice sounded late at night, or early in the morning, after his first cup of coffee, when he was worried or distracted or angry. He was learning how Neal’s eyes turned a deeper shade of blue when he felt a particularly strong emotion. Learning how Neal’s hands felt when they sought to take or give comfort. How they felt when they brushed over Peter’s shoulders that morning to distract himself from his worries.

Everything Peter learned about Neal made him want to learn more. He couldn’t explain that, any more than he could explain why he seemed to reach out and touch Neal – his shoulder, his back, his hair – at regular intervals, more than he did for anyone except for his wife. He couldn’t explain why seeing the man who had caused Neal pain filled him with rage.

Now, Friedrich swaggered his way up to the other table. Once there, he turned and grinned at Peter.

“Agent Burke, how nice to see you again” he said, his voice smooth and low. To an outside observer, it may have appeared a casual greeting.

To Peter, who was staring into Friedrich’s glittering eyes, and who could see the slight curl in his lips that made the grin into a leer, it was a threat.

Peter turned away from Friedrich without responding. He tried to ignore the roaring in his ears and the slight haziness at the edge of his vision. Deliberately, he uncurled his fist and set his palms flat against his thighs.
He needed to keep his cool, stay calm and collected, if he was going to pull this off. The judge may have been inclined to decide in their favor because of her dislike of ESIA and PIA, but Peter couldn’t rely on that. He needed to clearly communicate the practicality and humanity of allowing Neal to stay out of the Justice Facility.

The door to the judge’s chambers banged open. The clerk, a bailiff, and Judge Lawrence paraded in one after another.

“All rise,” called out the bailiff in a rich baritone. The clerk made his way to his desk, and the Judge climbed the steps to her bench on the dais and sat. Margaret straightened beside Peter. “You may be seated,” said the bailiff. “Court is now in session, the Honorable Judge Lawrence presiding.”

Peter squared his shoulders. This was no time to get distracted by his personal feelings towards Friedrich, or his personal feelings towards Neal, whatever they might be.

It was game time, and he was going to win. He was going to keep his promise to Neal, keep Neal out of the Justice Facility.

He was going to keep Neal.
Chapter Summary

Neal and Elizabeth have an interesting afternoon while Peter deals with the hearing.

Chapter Notes

Told you I would give you some quick updates. Maybe it will make you curse me less when I inevitably fall silent again (temporarily).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 21: Surprised

Monday, June 28, 2:05PM

Neal sat in the passenger seat of Elizabeth’s car, his knee jiggling as his foot tapped restlessly in the foot well. He stared out the window at the streets of the Upper West Side around them. The courthouse was on the edge of the Financial District and Chinatown. Not too far away, and yet the distance gaped between himself and his fate, a fate over which he had no control.

Elizabeth had kept up a constant patter of conversation since leaving Brooklyn, bless her soul. First, she had taken him to lunch, during which she had ignored the fact that he barely touched his sushi – sushi in front of him, for the first time in years, and he couldn’t even enjoy it – and asked him a million questions about his travels. It worked a bit, since he had to focus in order to answer her questions without revealing or admitting anything that could get him into trouble about exactly when and where he was…and what he was doing. When that became exhausting, he turned the conversation around and asked her questions about her life, which was easier but was a less effective distraction.

Neal appreciated all of her efforts, and yet he knew very little would be able to calm his anxiety between now and whenever he heard from Peter. Which could be soon – the hearing had started by now – or it could be in hours.

Would Peter call right away? Or would he wait? It would probably depend on the result. Peter would surely call with a good result, not wanting to make Neal wait for the news. On the other hand, he would probably wait if it was bad news, wanting to break that face to face, to be there for Neal. It would be easier to get the news with Peter physically in front of him, where he could touch and be touched for what might be the last time.

Neal closed his eyes a moment, feeling the despair rushing in like a wave. He allowed himself only a moment, then opened his eyes again and shook his head. He turned and forced his lips to curve, his eyes to gentle, and turned to Elizabeth with a smile.

“So, what are we distracting me with next?” he asked.
She laughed. “I want it to be a surprise.”

“I don’t really think I can take any more surprises right now,” Neal said honestly, looking back out the window. He jumped when he felt Elizabeth’s small hand on his arm.

“Just a couple more minutes,” she said. The warmth and understanding in her voice didn’t help his nerves. It just served to remind him what was at stake that afternoon.

He nodded, his foot tapping a staccato rhythm.

Elizabeth swung the car into the right lane, and pulled into a parking space.

“Okay,” she said. “We’re here.”

They exited the car. He buttoned the jacket of his suit as he straightened up, and looked around. He was somewhat familiar with the neighborhood, but couldn’t imagine what they were doing there.

Elizabeth came around to the sidewalk and linked her arm through his.

“This way,” she said brightly, tugging him up the street.

They stopped in front of a storefront without a sign. Its windows were covered in black cloth, so it was impossible to see inside.

Elizabeth turned to Neal and examined him, then frowned and reached up to adjust his shirt collar and tie. She was hiding his GPS collar, he realized. She then reached out and rapped on the glass door.

What in the world? Neal wondered with a small jolt of anxiety. Was Elizabeth bringing him somewhere inmates weren’t welcome? Would he be in danger? Get in trouble?

Elizabeth’s hand curled back around his bicep, squeezing slightly, and he felt himself calm. It was stupid to worry. Elizabeth had him, and she wouldn’t be bringing him anywhere that wasn’t meant with the best intentions. And if there were really any danger, Peter wouldn’t have allowed the outing at all.

A moment later, the door swung open, revealing a tall, reedy man in a suit. He beamed at them.

“Elizabeth, finally,” he said, reaching out and grabbing her free hand. The man tugged Elizabeth away from Neal and enfolded her in a hug.

When they separated, the man turned to Neal. “This must be your friend,” he said. He looked Neal up and down and his smile widened. “And what a friend. Does Peter know?”

Elizabeth laughed. “This is Neal,” she said. “Neal, this is Nathan Greenault. He and I have been bumping into each other on the art circuit for years, and he’s finally opening his own gallery. He offered to let me take a look before it officially opens next week. Nathan, Neal is an artist himself, but more than that, he’s an authenticator, and he’s got an incredible eye. You can trust his opinions.”

Greenault’s gaze sharpened. “Excellent,” he said. He reached out and grabbed Neal’s hand, shaking it firmly. “I’d love to hear what you think about the collection I’ve assembled.”

Neal was too busy staring at Elizabeth to respond. He was her friend? An artist? An authenticator? With an incredible eye?
Elizabeth was running a con. For him. So that he could visit a new gallery. When, for all she knew, he might case the joint for a future heist. He felt heat pricking his eyes, and desperately willed it back.

He pulled himself together and grinned at Greenault. “I’d love to see the collection,” he said. “Lead the way.”

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Monday, June 28, 2:12PM

Peter sat at the conference table while Margaret Beechwood stood beside him. She and Friedrich’s attorneys had introduced themselves to the judge, and Margaret was making her initial argument.

It was what Peter already knew: Peter was moving for a Forced Sale on the Contract because Friedrich has chosen to destroy property that was valuable to society. Peter should be allowed to purchase the Contract in order to take advantage of that value. Hearing it laid out in stark terms, Peter struggled not to cringe outwardly. Neal wasn’t property. He was a human being. It made him more compelled than ever to do something about ESIA and PIA, after this emergency situation with Neal was resolved.

When Margaret finished laying out her argument, including the justification for the conditional release to preserve value, it was Friedrich’s turn.

“Your Honor,” Suit Number One began, “this is a very nice intellectual argument, and a creative attempt on the part of the Plaintiff to interfere in Mr. Friedrich’s affairs. In practice, however, it does not hold, and thus the Plaintiff is unlikely to succeed on the merits. First, Plaintiff’s argument does not apply here. It is based entirely on cases involving property such as historical real estate or art. Something with an intrinsic value to society that is immeasurable in terms of actual dollars, thus it must be preserved in order for society to realize the full value of the property in perpetuity. In this case, the inmate’s value can – and has been – assessed. In fact, Plaintiff’s own case destroys his argument, since he is offering a dollar value to Mr. Friedrich, implying that the inmate’s life does have a measurable value.”

“Second, it is well established that under ESIA, the private Owner of the Contract has the absolute right to make all decisions in regard to the inmate. This includes not only work status and duties, but also living circumstances, comfort, and – this is important – health care. While the recent passage of the law means that there have not been many chances to adjudicate all of the issues in detail, there have been several cases that have addressed the issue of health care.”

He cleared his throat, and continued. “On three occasions – one case that was decided right here in New York – the Court has examined whether the Owner can make determinations about appropriate health care for the inmates whose Contracts they held. The Plaintiffs argued, in each of those cases, that, as adult human beings, the inmates must retain their right to make their own health care decisions. And in each of those cases, the Court held that, since there was a long tradition of having the State make decisions about health care for inmates pre-PIA and ESIA, and since the Owner had an increased value-based interest in the health of their inmate, it made logical sense to transfer that right to the Owner from the State. This is important, because if the inmate had become ill, Mr. Friedrich would have an established right to determine treatment, which could result in the death of the inmate. This is something that has already been decided by this Court.”

Peter shot a look at Margaret, and she gave a small shake of her head. She didn’t seem surprised by either argument.
“Finally – and there are other arguments in our brief as well, Your Honor, but I wanted to lay out
the simplest path to a decision here – regardless of this Court’s ultimate decision on the likelihood
of success on the merits of this case, under no circumstances should the inmate be allowed out on
conditional release. In light of what happened while he was under Mr. Friedrich’s roof, he poses a
real threat to society by being allowed out in public. At a minimum, he should be remanded to the
Justice Facility to await the results of the arbitration.”

Judge Lawrence was frowning at Suit Number One. She turned to Margaret. “Ms. Beechwood? A
response?”

“Thank you, Your Honor,” said Margaret. “First, in regard to Mr. Black’s second argument
regarding an Owner’s right to make health care decisions on the inmate’s behalf, Mr. Black has
unfortunately misread the cases, particularly the one that was decided right here in the Southern
District of New York. This Court reasoned that an Owner has the same responsibility that the State
has to protect the health of the inmate, within reason, since the Owner is standing in for the state
and is in full control and care of the inmate. This Court reasoned that the Owner’s additional value
interest in the inmate would incentivize the Owner to make those health care decisions carefully.

“I think we are now seeing an example of how those incentives might also work in the other
direction, but that is not the issue before us today. Here, we are not talking about health care
decisions, but decisions to end a person’s life, without due process of the law. While ESIA does
allow Owners to select the death penalty for an infraction, that has not yet been tested. Mr. Caffrey
would, in fact, be the very first inmate to be put to death under these provisions of ESIA. Any
decision on that would be a case of first impression, and there is no precedent for the Defendant to
hide behind.”

Peter couldn’t quite control his sharp intake of breath. He hadn’t realized – why hadn’t he even
realized – that Neal would be the first person to suffer the death penalty under the Justice
provisions of ESIA? He hadn’t even thought about it, but it made sense. Suddenly, Peter became
aware that Neal’s case wasn’t just Neal’s case. It had the potential to impact every single inmate in
custody.

Well, he had always done well under pressure, and so had Neal. As a team, they could do this right.

“Second, in regard to Mr. Black’s contention that Mr. Burke’s offer of a dollar value to purchase
the Contract undercuts his intrinsic value argument, that is wishful thinking. The dollar value
offered, in accordance with ESIA’s provision for Petitions for Forced Sale, is an offer of fair
compensation for the Contract’s value to Mr. Friedrich and has nothing to do with Mr. Caffrey’s
value to society as a whole. The dollar value offered is based on the price Mr. Friedrich paid for
Mr. Caffrey’s Contract as well as the value remaining on the Contract of the deceased inmate.”

Peter smiled slightly at Margaret’s repeated reference to Neal as Mr. Caffrey and not as the inmate.
A deliberate choice of words to humanize Neal for the Court.

Margaret continued. “On the other hand, Mr. Caffrey’s value to society is indeed immeasurable.
He was conditionally released into Mr. Burke’s custody late Friday afternoon. Your Honor has
read the affidavits regarding his medical and emotional state and the conditions in which he was
being held at the Justice Facility. Mr. Burke can supplement that testimony today with further
information if the Court desires. Regardless, even though Mr. Caffrey has been in Mr. Burke’s care
for only two full days, during which he was undoubtedly recovering from the severe mistreatment
he received, he has already assisted Mr. Burke in making substantial progress in an important and
high-profile case. If Mr. Caffrey can display that much value in that short a time period, we can
only imagine what he could do with four years in Mr. Burke’s care.”
The Judge’s gaze sharpened. She looked right at Peter. “I’d be interested in hearing the details of Mr. Caffrey’s benefit to your case,” she said.

Margaret smiled. “Certainly, Your Honor. Because this is a highly sensitive matter, we would ask that this testimony be heard in camera.”

Suit Number One – Mr. Black, apparently – spoke up. “We object, Your Honor. We cannot argue against an establishment of value if we do not have the opportunity to hear what that suggested value is.”

The Judge shook her head. “No, I think Ms. Beechwood’s request is appropriate. Mr. Friedrich is not an agent of the state, and has no right to information on an ongoing FBI investigation. Unless, of course, you don’t trust me to assess the value accurately?”

Peter bit back a smile. He liked Judge Lawrence even more than he had on Friday.

“We certainly trust you, your honor,” said Mr. Black. “But we would be willing to sign a confidentiality agreement.”

“I’ll hear the testimony in camera and make a determination whether a confidentiality agreement and release of the information is warranted. Let’s take a brief recess while Mr. Burke and I retire to my chambers in private.”

The judge stood, the bailiff called “all rise,” and everyone else got to their feet. Friedrich was slower to stand, looking like he was personally inconvenienced.


Peter nodded. When the clerk motioned, he followed the man back through the rear door and down a short hallway. He was ushered into a lushly-appointed office, where Judge Lawrence was sweeping her robes under her and sitting behind a large mahogany desk.

“Mr. Burke,” she said, with a smile. “Sit. Don’t be nervous.”

He laughed – nervously – and sat in one of the leather chairs facing her.

“What I want to hear about,” she said, “is the progress on this case. If I think it’s necessary for the Defendant to hear about it in order to contest the value issue, we’ll do a confidentiality agreement. If I think the value is clearly established and can be addressed in a general manner without referencing details, I’ll do that instead.”

Peter nodded. “I appreciate Your Honor’s discretion,” he said.

“So, tell me about this case.” She sat back in her chair and laced her hands together. He thought maybe she even looked a little eager.

“We’ve been chasing this guy for a while now,” he said, leaning forward. “He’s been on the FBI’s radar for few years, but my team started going after him about two and a half years ago. Before that, most of his work took place in Europe, and Interpol was taking the lead. We call him ‘The Dutchman.’”

“Why ‘the Dutchman’?” asked the judge.

“Because whenever we get close, he disappears. Like the ghost ship of legend.”
Judge Lawrence smiled. “Clever. Go on.”

“For two and a half years – and for a while before that, with Interpol – no one knew who this guy was. No clue at all. Neal figured it out in less then twenty-four hours.”

“How?”

Peter grinned. “We got a hit on a BOLO we had issued, and Neal…he just followed the thread, combined it with his unique knowledge and insider perspective, and I would be willing to put a lot of money…no, I would bet my life… that the man we spoke with yesterday morning is the Dutchman.”

“You spoke with him?” asked the Judge, her eyes sparkling.

Peter explained about the Snow White books, the dead bookseller, the National Archives, the Goya restoration, and their conversation with Hagan. When he was finished, he shook his head.

“We have more now than we’ve ever had. We’re going to catch him this time, I can feel it. But I need Neal in order to do it.” He placed his hands on the edge of the desk, his fingers leaving smudges on the polished wood. “Neal has a particular blend of knowledge, experience, and intelligence that is unparalleled. With my own set of experience and knowledge, we could be an unstoppable team. The man is brilliant. Utterly, completely, incomparably brilliant. One of a kind. Judge Lawrence, this is…”

He trailed off, unable to finish the sentence. He couldn’t let his emotions get in the way here. He struggled to maintain control so he could explain, logically, why this was so important.

“I understand,” said the Judge softly. “His value is immeasurable.”

“To the FBI,” said Peter. And to me. The thought entered his mind without warning, and he dropped his eyes to the desk.

“Right. To the FBI.” She studied him for a moment, and he shifted in his chair under the scrutiny. After a moment, she stood. “Thank you, Mr. Burke. I think I can address the value issue generally without need for details. Shall we return?”

Peter nodded and followed her back out into the courtroom. He heard the bailiff command the court to rise and be seated as he made his way back to Margaret and the conference table. She fastened her eyes on him, a question in them. He nodded, and she relaxed.

“Okay,” said the judge. “Mr. Burke has described to me, in detail, a current active FBI investigation. With Mr. Caffrey’s assistance in the past two days alone, the FBI now knows the identity of a criminal they have been trying to identify for over two years. Mr. Caffrey’s skills in this area cannot be easily duplicated. Therefore, after hearing Mr. Burke’s testimony, I have concluded that Mr. Caffrey does indeed have an intrinsic value to society if he is working with law enforcement to apprehend criminals. I renew my finding that there is a likelihood of success on the merits in this case.”

Peter felt half of the tension in his body release at once. The judge continued.

“Furthermore, because of his valuable assistance in this active investigation and its time-sensitive nature, and because the conditions in which Mr. Caffrey was being held at the Justice Facility are so abhorrent, I find that it is necessary to allow the continued conditional release of Mr. Caffrey into Mr. Burke’s custody. As the agent who initially apprehended Mr. Caffrey, Mr. Burke has particular knowledge and skills that will allow him to ensure that Mr. Caffrey remains in his
custody until the adjudication of the Forced Sale.”

Peter wanted to jump up and down and high-five everyone. But Suit Number One was talking again.

“Your Honor, if I may address the conditional release?”

The judge nodded.

“It has come to our attention that the inmate has already attempted an escape. We are concerned that, if he continues in the Plaintiff’s custody, next time he may be successful.”

Peter froze. *Neal tried to escape? When?*

* WC – WC – WC – WC – WC – WC – WC *

*Monday, June 28, 3:15PM*

Neal glanced at his phone and tucked it back into his pocket. No word from Peter.

Elizabeth had her arm linked through Neal’s again as they strolled up the street. He tried to focus on what she was saying.

“I really loved those two portraits, of the construction workers,” she said. “There was something so rich about them.”

“They were very *Alice Neel*,” he said. “I liked them too.”

“Yes, exactly! Alice Neel.” She hummed in pleasure. “That was fun. Did you have fun?”

He smiled down at her, and the smile was genuine. “I did. Elizabeth, thank you. I’m sorry if I’ve been distracted, but I did really appreciate that. It’s been a while since I had the chance to enjoy art that wasn’t in a book or on a computer.”

“You know, I have a couple of former clients who might be interested in those portraits. I’ll have to give them a call, invite them to come with us to the opening next week.”

*Us. Next week.* Neal felt his pulse speed up, and he had to say something.

“I think…” he cleared his throat, started again. “That would be nice. But I think maybe you shouldn’t count on me being able to go next week. Next week I might…I might not…”

Elizabeth tightened her grip on his arm. “Stop that,” she said, her voice low and stern. “Stop it right now. Peter is handling it, and next week we’ll all go out to dinner and then get drunk at the gallery opening, and go home and eat ice cream. Drunk ice cream is the best ice cream.”

He took a deep breath. He didn’t have her optimism, but he was willing to pretend, for her sake. He forced himself to relax and smile down at her. “Right. Peter’s on it. Drunk ice cream. I’m in.”

“Good. How are you feeling? Do you need to find a place to sit? Get some coffee?” she asked, searching his face.

He thought about it. “I’m okay,” he answered honestly. “I should probably avoid coffee right now, anyway…I’m still wound up and won’t be able to relax until we hear from Peter. But I feel okay.”

They walked in silence for a few minutes, until she paused.
“Here we are,” she said. “Our next stop.”

He looked at the storefront, and the sign proclaiming it was a consignment shop. Elizabeth was beaming at him, and he couldn’t help but grin back and laugh.

“Okay, I’ll bite. What are we doing here?”

“Well,” she said, “I made some calls, and found this place. Come on, let’s go in.”

She released his arm but then grabbed his hand and dragged him into the shop. It was dimly lit, but when he looked around, he realized that it wasn’t your average thrift store. The clothing in the shop was clearly higher end than usual. His eyes lit up.

“More clothes?” he asked, unable to keep the tinge of hope out of his voice. “Another suit, maybe?”

“Let’s see what we can find,” she said, her tone mischievous.

Neal tried to shove the thoughts that this might be a waste of time and money out of his head. Elizabeth was right. He had to think positively. Enjoy the shopping, and the clothes, even if he ultimately was unable to use them.

He began to examine the racks of suits, looking for something that would fit him and that matched his style. He was holding up what looked like a high-quality Brioni knock-off that might fit, when he heard a gasp behind him.

He turned and saw an older woman, dressed in fine clothing, gaping at him.

Why was she looking at him like that? Did she notice his collar?

“Can I help you?” he asked, with a forced smile. He glanced around, looking for Elizabeth. She was a few feet away, poring through a stack of ties. Several were looped over her arm.

The woman shook her head slightly. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I didn’t mean to startle you. I just…”

She reached out and ran a finger over his sleeve.

He watched her, puzzled. “It’s…it’s a Devore,” he offered. Maybe that was why she was startled.

“Yes, I know,” she said, removing her hand and smiling at him slyly. “My husband won that from Sy himself in a poker game.”

“He…your husband…what?” Neal blinked at the woman.

“That suit,” she said. “It was my husband’s. He beat Sy Devore in a back door draw, and that was his prize.”

Neal looked down at his suit. “This suit was your husband’s?”

“My late husband,” she said, sighing. “But it looks good on you. Almost as good as it looked on him.”

“Thank you,” he said. “I love it. I’ll wear it with pride, knowing it came from a man smart enough to sweep a woman like you off your feet.”

She chuckled, and swatted his arm. “I like you,” she said. She pursed her lips a moment. “You know, that suit was among the first bunch I donated. I have another few here today that I just
turned in. But I also have an entire closet full at my house.”

Neal couldn’t help his excitement. “A whole closet full?” he asked.

“Indeed. I couldn’t imagine anyone better suited to wear them. Are you interested?”

Neal’s grin widened so much he felt his lips stretch painfully. “I am very interested,” he said. He turned and looked over his shoulder. “Elizabeth? Come on over here, and meet…”

“June,” said the woman. “June Ellington.”

“Neal Caffrey,” he said. “So very pleased to meet you.”

* WC – WC – WC – WC – WC – WC – WC *

Monday, June 28, 3:20PM

When had Neal tried to escape? Peter searched his mind wildly. He had glanced at his phone on the way back into the courtroom from the judge’s chambers. If Neal had made a run for it that afternoon, Elizabeth would have called him. The GPS device would have notified him.

Margaret was shooting Peter a questioning look, and he shrugged, eyes wide.

Judge Lawrence turned to them. “Is this true?”

“No, Your Honor,” said Margaret. “There has been no escape attempt.”

Unless Neal ran this afternoon, and somehow Elizabeth couldn’t reach him. Peter tried to keep his features under control. Would Neal have made a break for it? After he promised he wouldn’t? And why wouldn’t El have been able to let him know?

Also, Friedrich’s attorney had said Neal had attempted an escape. So…if he had, what had happened? None of it made any sense.

Suit Number One was talking again. “We obtained the GPS tracking information on the inmate’s collar. This information indicates that the collar issued a series of shocks when the inmate left the boundaries of the Plaintiff’s residence without permission yesterday morning.”

The judge looked to Peter. “Mr. Burke, do you have any knowledge of this?”

Peter stood, so relieved he wasn’t sure how he managed to get to his feet.

“Yes, Your Honor, and it’s not what it looks like. Neal was with me at the time, and we were leaving the house on a matter related to the FBI investigation. I had forgotten to change the GPS settings from the boundaries of my residence to a radius around my person. It was completely my fault, and Neal did nothing wrong. He was following me out of the house to my car – with my knowledge – when the collar activated.”

He glanced at Margaret, who also looked relieved, and then back at the judge.

“Frankly,” he said, rubbing the back of his neck, “I felt horrible about it.”

“Your Honor,” said Suit Number One, “respectfully, the Plaintiff has an interest in covering up any escape attempt in order to help his Petition for Forced Sale—“

“My wife was there too,” snapped Peter. “I can call her if you want, and she can tell you how we
both took care of the collar burns and how she scolded me for being so careless. Also, if you wanted to check, your client—"

Margaret reached out and gripped Peter’s wrist. He took a deep breath. He couldn’t believe had been about to accuse Friedrich of spying on his house. He needed to calm down.

“Even so, Your Honor,” said Suit Number One, ignoring Peter’s outburst, “the fact remains that the inmate committed murder and is therefore dangerous—"

The judge held up a hand. “There has been no adjudication on whether Mr. Caffrey was or was not responsible for the death of the other inmate. In fact, to your point, Mr. Black, the only word we have on that is Mr. Friedrich’s. If Mr. Caffrey is innocent of that crime, perhaps Mr. Friedrich has an interest in covering up the real perpetrator.”

Suit Number One blanched. “Your Honor, are you suggesting that Mr. Friedrich—“

“I am suggesting nothing. Merely extending your logic in both directions. As of now, Mr. Caffrey is only accused of being responsible for the death of the other inmate. I have examined his record. He has no history of violence whatsoever.” She turned back to Peter. “Mr. Burke, do you have any concerns about Mr. Caffrey being in your home?”

“I do not, Your Honor,” he said, as firmly as he could manage between gritted teeth. “In fact, my wife is with Neal now. If I had any doubts about his non-violent nature, I would never have allowed him near her.”

Judge Lawrence nodded. “I’m satisfied,” she said. When Suit Number One began to object, she held up her hand. “Mr. Burke, are you willing to take full responsibility for Mr. Caffrey while he is in your custody?”

Peter nodded. “I am, Your Honor. Without hesitation.”

“Then it’s settled. The conditional release stands as ordered on June 25th.”

Judge Lawrence got to her feet. The bailiff did his thing, and after the judge exited the courtroom, Peter turned to Margaret, elated.

She smiled back at him, squeezed his shoulder. “One hurdle down. Lots more to go,” she cautioned.

He nodded. As they gathered their things and left the courtroom, he felt Friedrich’s murderous glare on him. At that moment, he didn’t care. All he cared about was giving Neal the good news.

* WC – WC – WC – WC – WC – WC – WC *

Monday, June 28, 5:10PM

The drive back to Brooklyn had a different feel to it than the drive into Manhattan.

Neal was still tense but in a different way.

The back seat of Elizabeth’s car was piled high with incredible custom suits, shirts, ties, shoes…an extensive wardrobe. June Ellington had hustled them back to her incredible estate, shown Neal into the apartment on the top floor, and had him try on a few dozen suits as well as casual wear. When he protested that it was too much, she had brushed his comments aside and assured him that the rest of the extensive closet was his for the taking…as long as he came over for dinner now and
again. She hadn’t even let Elizabeth pay her anything.

Of course, the entire time, while Neal was enjoying the immersion into high-end fashion, he was also worrying about what was going on at the courthouse. Peter wasn’t calling, and as far as Neal was concerned, that meant he wasn’t going to be able to actually wear any of these clothes.

Elizabeth was going on about how nice June was, how lucky they were to have run into her, how beautiful her house was, how dashing Neal looked in the suits…she had been keeping up a one-sided conversation the entire drive home.

Neal wished he could contribute, but the closer they got to the Burkes’ house, the more on edge he felt. He was sure that, as soon as he arrived, they would be there to take him into custody.

He hoped that they’d at least let him change before they whisked him away, so that the Devore wouldn’t be ruined by the Justice Facility.

“Hey. Neal.” Elizabeth’s voice was urgent now.

He glanced over at her, and try as he might, he knew he wasn’t successfully hiding the panic he was feeling. It must have been all over his face.

“Oh, Neal…I’m sure everything is fine,” she said.

“He hasn’t called,” Neal whispered. “He would have called if it was good news.”

“You don’t know that,” she said. “Listen, my husband is a great, wonderful, incredible man. But he’s a little dumb sometimes about people’s feelings. I bet he’s waiting at home, all excited about surprising you with the good news, not even considering the fact that the delay has you tied up in knots.”


“Why don’t you text him?” she asked. “I should have done it, but I didn’t want to interrupt the hearing. It must be over by now, I think the court closes at 4:30.”

Neal slid his hand into his pocket, ran his fingers over the edges of the phone Peter had gotten him. He couldn’t bring himself to pull it out. Maybe he wanted to wait a little longer. If he waited, he could pretend like he wasn’t doomed.

Elizabeth glanced at him, concerned. “Listen, we’ll be home in a couple of minutes. I bet he’s there. I’ll bet you…a foot massage that he’s waiting for us with good news.”

Neal let out a surprised laugh. He couldn’t help the small smile. “Okay, you’re on,” he said. “For what it’s worth, I hope you’re the one getting a foot massage tonight.”

“Oh, me too,” she said.

“And Elizabeth? Thanks. For this afternoon. I had a really good time, and I can’t…I can’t thank you – or Peter – enough for what you’re doing for me.”

She didn’t respond, just reached out and grabbed his hand, and he let her take it and hold it for the remaining few minutes it took to get home.

Home, he thought, as she let go of his hand to maneuver into a parking space. It was too soon to be thinking of the Burke house as home. Wasn’t it?
“Leave the clothes for later,” she said, as she opened her door. “Let’s go whack Peter over the head for not calling us.”

When he got out of the car, she was pointing down the street. Sure enough, there was Peter’s car. He was home.

“I get the first swing,” he said, and Elizabeth laughed. Then she was at his side again, her fingers laced with his. It felt so…normal. It shouldn’t have. It should have felt far too intimate for someone he just met, but it didn’t. He squeezed her hand, and she squeezed back. They climbed the steps.

“Well, whatever happens,” she said, “remember that we want you here, and we’re going to keep fighting for it.”

He nodded and swallowed hard. She opened the door, and they stepped inside.

There was Peter, standing in the middle of the living room. His face was stern, controlled. Neal felt a wave of cold as every nerve in his body braced for flight. He’d run. He’d run when they came at him, he wouldn’t be able to help it.

But there was no one else there. No other agents or officials. He whipped his head around, looking for the people who were going to take him back, but there was no one.

Suddenly, Peter grinned. He was crossing the space between them and his arms were around Neal, squeezing him so hard he started to see stars.

Neal heard a roaring in his ears, and felt his legs start to shake. He leaned into Peter’s embrace, if only to keep himself standing. After a moment, he realized Peter was talking.

“Wait. What?” said Neal. He pushed at Peter’s shoulders, trying to get some distance, to be able to see his face.

Peter laughed. “We’re good,” he said. “The judge affirmed her order of conditional release and confirmed her finding that we had a likelihood of success on the merits. You’re not going anywhere.”

Neal’s legs finally gave out as relief coursé through him.

“Woah,” said Peter, catching him. Peter pulled Neal, stumbling, to the sofa, where he collapsed. Peter sat beside him, placed his hands on either side of Neal’s face. His fingers danced over Neal’s cheekbones, his forehead, his eyelashes. “Hey there,” he said softly. “You still with us?”

Neal tried to nod, but could only look at Peter. He was feeling such an intense…something…he couldn’t breathe properly.

You’re not going anywhere, Peter had said. This was real. There was no one here to take him back. He could stay. He started to grin, at the same time he felt his eyes filling. Damn it. He was helpless at the moment, unable to move. There was nothing he could do except feel all of it.

Peter leaned forward and rested his forehead against Neal’s, sliding his hands downs to rest on the place where Neal’s shoulders met his neck, over the GPS collar. “Okay, I get it. I should have called you,” he said. “I wanted to…I thought it would be fun to surprise you with the good news. I picked up Italian food, there’s a feast waiting on the table. I know you like vodka sauce, and Bertinelli’s makes the best in Brooklyn.”

Peter was rambling, and Neal gulped back adrenaline. He managed to make his arms work, and
without him really thinking it through, they came up to wrap around Peter. His hands dug into
Peter’s back, he shifted until his head fell onto Peter’s shoulder, and Peter tucked him right in, a
palm on the back of his head, like he belonged there.

And what the hell was that about?

After a minute, Neal took a deep breath and pulled back. “Okay,” he said. “Yeah, you should have
called me. I like surprises, but not that kind of surprise. I was sure you didn’t call because you
wanted to break the bad news in person. Or because you didn’t want me to run.”

“I’m sorry, Neal,” said Peter. “I promised I’d take care of it. Remember?”

Neal nodded. “Yeah. I remember.”

“And I didn’t think you were going to run. You told me you wouldn’t.”

“Right. I meant that.” He did mean it, Neal realized. He really meant it.

Peter cleared his throat then, seeming to suddenly realize he was still partly wrapped around Neal.
He shifted back on the couch, and then stood.

“Well, food’s hot. Should we eat?”

“I’m starving and it smells amazing,” said Elizabeth from the entryway. “Neal?”

“Let’s eat,” he said. He carefully pushed himself to his feet. His legs seemed to be working again.
“And I think, after dinner…” he shot Elizabeth a glance, “I owe someone a foot massage.”

She giggled at Peter’s confused expression, and led the way into the dining room.

Chapter End Notes

If you’re at all curious:

Random (but sort of typical) federal courtroom:
http://thehorizongroupinc.com/project/federal-courtroom/

Alice Neel portrait:
https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/culturepicturegalleries/7878870/Alice-Neel-
Painted-Truths-at-the-Whitechapel-Gallery.html?image=4
Chapter Summary

Aftermath.

Chapter 22: Harmless

Monday, June 28, 7:40PM

Peter stood in the doorway to the kitchen and watched as Neal unbuttoned his sleeves and rolled them up to just above his elbows. His suit jacket and tie had been abandoned partway through their leisurely dinner, and Neal had popped open the first couple of buttons of his shirt. That – in combination with the way the lines of anxiety had evaporated from the corners of his eyes and mouth – made Neal look truly relaxed for the first time since…well, since Peter ever remembered seeing him.

The adjustment of the sleeves allowed a thin edge of the wounds on Neal’s arms to peek out from the edge of the fabric. There were no bandages; they must have been healing well. Peter scolded himself for not asking Neal about them and decided that, before they went to sleep, he’d take a look himself.

Peter pushed the rest of the way into the kitchen, setting the last of the dishes from the table by the sink, where Neal was testing out the temperature of the water.

“You sure you want to do this?” asked Peter. “I can handle it.”

Neal shot him a look through his eyelashes. “I can handle it, too.”

“I know you can – what I’m saying is, you don’t have to. You can go change, sack out on the sofa with Elizabeth.”

Elizabeth had protested, but after dinner, and after they had gathered Neal’s new clothes from El’s car and brought them upstairs, the men had hustled her to change, with the promise that when she returned downstairs, the dishes would be clean and they’d have picked out a movie to watch.

“Or,” continued Peter, “I could make some coffee, you could have a seat and we could chat while I get this done.”

“Peter, I got this. Why don’t you go up and change and sack out on the sofa.” Neal sounded frustrated. “There are a handful of dishes – most of which go in the dishwasher – and two wine glasses to wash. I think I can manage.”

“The dishwasher is clean and needs to be emptied,” Peter pointed out.

“So I’ll empty it.” Neal turned back to the sink.

“You don’t know where anything goes.”

“I just might be smart enough to figure it out.” Neal looked up with a raised eyebrow, and Peter
“Okay, okay. Why don’t I empty the dishwasher while you rinse,” he said.

“Whatever you want, Peter,” said Neal with a resigned sigh. Peter moved to the dishwasher and pulled it open. “Just trying to be useful,” Neal muttered.

Peter hesitated. Should he address that? He decided to let it go. It wasn’t a bad thing that Neal wanted to help out. He just wished the kid didn’t think he had to in order to earn his place. Since talking about that would open up a can of worms about the fact that, in essence, Neal did have to technically earn his place by helping the FBI, it was probably better to pretend he hadn’t heard it. For now.

“Why don’t you tell me what you want to talk about?” said Neal, glancing at Peter.

Peter sorted through clean silverware, and took a breath. “We should probably talk about the hearing, and what happens next.”

Beside Peter, Neal stiffened slightly. “Yeah. Probably a good idea.”

“I thought about just letting it go a couple of days…let us enjoy the victory.” There was a clatter as Peter shuffled the silverware into the correct trays. “But Margaret and I talked this afternoon, and I think it’s important that you’re up to speed on everything, since…”

“Since it’s kind of all about me,” Neal finished for him.

“Right. So I gave you the highlights already.”

During dinner, Peter had described the hearing in bullet points, letting Neal in, briefly, on the arguments raised by Friedrich and the particulars of the judge’s decision. He had also mentioned that Margaret Beechwood and Friedrich’s attorneys had agreed on the Wednesday of the following week for the arbitration. After that, they had moved on to more pleasing topics, like how El and Neal had spent the afternoon.

Now, Neal was carefully washing Elizabeth’s delicate wine glasses. Peter watched him for a moment. Whenever Peter washed the wine glasses, El complained that he left spots. Maybe Neal had a secret he could learn.

After a moment, Neal glanced up. “Yes. And?”

Peter shook his head. “Sorry. The bottom line is that a key rationale for the judge’s decision – what made it so easy for her to decide in our favor, I think – was your work on the Hagan case. Therefore—“

“The more progress we make with my help before the arbitration next week, the better our chances.” Neal nodded. “That’s good, right?”

“It’s great. As long as we continue to make progress. It makes solving this case even more important than it was. We can’t afford to let Hagan slip away again, so I was thinking – if you’re feeling up to it – we could go in tomorrow. To the office.” Peter felt a little thrill of excitement about bringing Neal in to the FBI. He couldn’t wait for others, like Hughes, to see the kid think.

Neal placed the second wine glass, now perfectly washed and dried, into its place on the shelf. He nodded. “Sure. Sounds good. I’m anxious to get back to work.”
Peter wondered if that was because, as with the dishes, he wanted to be useful. Of course, in that sense, being useful was exactly what Neal needed to do.

“Hey,” said Neal, turning to Peter. “Nothing happened with Hagan today?”

“I did talk to Diana this evening, right before you guys got home,” said Peter. “She hasn’t gotten a hit on any properties linked to Hagan yet. She’s still working.”

She had also wanted to update Peter on the investigation into the mysterious silver car, which Peter was not yet ready to tell Neal about. The plates had turned out to be stolen – of course – so identifying the owner was no help. Jones had spoken with her. She lived in Ohio and was excited to hear that the plates had been spotted, but since she had reported them stolen several months earlier, it didn’t really impact her. Diana had set a team on trying to identify the driver from the images, but it was a long shot. They might never know if the incident was really an accident or if Friedrich was behind it.

“Do you want me to…reach out to my contacts?” asked Neal. Peter had slowed in emptying the dishwasher, and Neal had begun to pull out water glasses and put them away. Peter leaned in to help him finish.

“By contacts, do you mean Haversham?” asked Peter.

Neal shrugged. “To start, probably.”

“Let’s wait and see if we come up with anything tomorrow before we go that route,” Peter said, after a moment. He didn’t want Neal spending any more time with his contacts than necessary, at least until the arbitration was settled and Neal was clear of the danger from Friedrich.

“Was there anything else? From the hearing?” Neal began to slide the dirty dishes into the dishwasher, and Peter backed off, leaning against the refrigerator to watch.

“Well…” Peter hesitated, but they did need to talk about this. “Friedrich is hammering on the ‘he’s a danger to the public’ angle. I know he’s full of shit,” he said quickly, at Neal’s panicked expression. “And for what it’s worth, I think the judge does too, because she specifically mentioned that she had reviewed your record and seen no history of violence. But between Friedrich’s lawyer insisting on the danger thing, and them clearly having access to your GPS records…I want us to think about how we are going to persuade the arbitrator that you’re harmless.”

Neal let out a short laugh. “Harmless, am I? You sure know how to make a guy feel like a man.”

“You know what I mean,” said Peter. “I mean, you hate guns, so you don’t carry them. When I caught you the first time, you weren’t armed.” He began to tick it off on his fingers. “Of all of the crimes you’ve been connected with—“

“Allegedly,” reminded Neal.

Peter rolled his eyes. “Of all the crimes you’ve been connected with, none of them have resulted in injury or death to anyone. You didn’t get into a single altercation while in the work camp…right?”

“Right,” said Neal. “So none of the things you think I did involved violence?”

The question was asked lightly, while Neal was closing the dishwasher, as if he just wanted the quick confirmation without Peter really noticing he was answering. But Peter did notice, and
narrowed his eyes.

“Neal,” he said, his voice lowering in a warning, “if there’s something I need to know about—

Neal shook his head, raising his palms outward. “There isn’t. Really. I just…” He turned away and began to wipe the counter down. “It’s possible there is a…situation…that I was…near. And in this situation, someone else may have been violent.”

Peter thought. He went over the many jobs he was certain Neal had pulled, and others that he was pretty sure Neal was involved with in some way. None of them had involved injury or death to anyone.

“Well,” he said, finally, “if the FBI doesn’t know about it, then Friedrich probably can’t dig it up. But if he does…”

Neal smiled. “With the right promise of immunity, I’ll tell you everything.”

“How about, with the right promise that it will just get you extended time on your Contract, with me, you’ll tell me everything.”

They eyed each other for a minute. Neal shook out the dishrag and laid it on the counter to dry. He folded his arms across his chest and straightened his shoulders before he spoke. “Maybe that time could be considered already added, since you’re asking for four years to account for something I didn’t do.”

“I’m asking for four years to assure the arbitrator that your potential value to society will be able to be realized, so that they go for our argument and you don’t end up back on death row,” said Peter. “Not for you to atone for the murder of the other inmate.”

There was complete silence in the kitchen, and it stretched across one minute, then two. Peter was suddenly struck by how ridiculous the conversation was. He was in the middle of saving Neal’s life, and from everything that had gone on so far, Neal clearly knew and appreciated that. Peter understood immediately that Neal was merely reacting to feeling helpless. He wanted more control over his situation, and he hadn’t seemed to like being called “harmless.” Neal was just trying to retain some dignity by negotiating over this meaningless point.

“You didn’t kill anyone?” asked Peter.

“I have never killed anyone, Peter,” said Neal. “The most I’ve ever done is give someone a black eye, and they deserved it. Believe me.”

Peter nodded. “I do. Okay. I won’t push you on this now, but if it looks like it might be a problem, you tell me about this…situation…and while I can’t offer you immunity from the FBI, I can promise immunity from me.”

“How about?”

“Meaning I won’t breathe a word of it to anyone or pursue you personally for that crime, whatever it is.”

Peter held his breath, but Neal just nodded. “Deal,” he said. Then he grinned. “That was fun.”

Peter rolled his eyes, but couldn’t help the answering grin. “Okay, why don’t you head up. I’m going to check on El. Meet you down here in a few for a movie?”
Neal pursed his lips. “Actually, I think I’m going to call it a night. Maybe read for a while. I feel like just…” He trailed off, shrugging apologetically.

“Sure,” said Peter, understanding. You feel like enjoying being here, and not back at the Justice Facility. “Let us know if you need anything.”

“I’m fine.” He started for the door to the kitchen. Just before he exited, and turned back, his eyes sparkling. “Besides, you need to spend more time with your wife. Otherwise I might try to steal her from you. I may not be has harmless as you think, Peter. Elizabeth and I had a great time today.”

Peter let out a laugh, then grabbed up the dishrag and threw it. It harmlessly hit the door as it swung shut, Neal already gone.

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Monday, June 28, 8:10PM

After changing into Peter’s pajama pants and t-shirt – he really should see about getting some of his own – Neal spent some time organizing his wardrobe, hanging up all the new suits and shirts, sorting the ties by color, lining up the shoes in a neat row. He reveled in the feeling of the high-quality fabric between his fingers, at the sight of closet filled with things that were his. It had been a long time since he had had a closet. Not just since he was sent to the work camp, but long before. He hadn’t lived in any place long enough to have a closet, to fill it with things…

…but not since Kate.

The thought made him reach for the burner phone. He should let Mozzie know what happened with the hearing, and if he could light a fire under his friend to keep digging for information on Kate, and her whereabouts, all the better.

Mozzie picked up after four rings. “Neal?” he asked. He seemed breathless, like he had been running.

“Yeah. I thought we weren’t using real names,” Neal responded. “What are you doing?”

“Nothing,” said Mozzie, in a way that clearly indicated he had been doing something. “So you’re still only partially captive?”

Neal laughed. “Yes. The hearing went well. They let me stay with Peter.”

“They let you stay with…Neal, we need to have a conversation about your attitude,” said Mozzie in exasperation.

“Better Peter than the Justice Facility,” Neal reminded his friend.

“Well, I’m glad to hear your voice. When I didn’t hear from you this afternoon, I thought I would have to mount a siege.”

“Moz, were you worried about me?” Neal smiled into the phone. “I’m touched.”

“Whatever,” said Mozzie. “Until you give me the real information about where you stashed your…time capsule…I need to keep you alive.”

Neal sank onto the bed. So Mozzie had figured out that Neal had given him a fake location for his remaining stash of stolen valuables and cash. “What gave it away?” he asked.
Mozzie sighed. “When I realized Kate was in San Diego. Why would she be in San Diego? You jumped so quickly to the idea that someone had her, that she wasn’t there of her own volition, that I knew you knew something I didn’t. Like the fact that you maybe had told Kate that your stash was in San Diego? It wasn’t that hard to then conclude that it wasn’t in Portland, either, like you told me.”

Neal sighed. What Mozzie was saying was true. When he went down for the bond forgery, he had told each of them a different fake location for the stash. He was feeling like he couldn’t trust anyone at that point. He didn’t know if Moz had set him up to be caught, or if Kate had, or if they had been in on it together.

So he had dangled the fake info, to see if a stone got kicked over. Of course, now he knew that Peter had caught him because Peter was just *that* good. He also knew that Mozzie hadn’t gone after the fake stash, and Kate had.

“Don’t be offended,” he said. “Please. I had to know.”

“Well, now you know. You can trust me, and not her.”

Neal was quiet for a minute. He was sure it wasn’t as simple as all that, but Mozzie had never been particularly fond of Kate, so it wasn’t going to do any good to try to persuade him otherwise. Not when he wasn’t totally sure himself.

“Speaking of—“

“I haven’t found anything else,” said Mozzie. “But, even though I think it’s a stupid idea—“

“Okay, Moz, I get it…“

“—possibly the stupidest idea you’ve ever had—“

“Hitting me over the head now, Moz, I understand.”

“—and might get you killed for something other than being dumb enough to sell your Contract to a private citizen… actually, I take it back. I guess *that* was actually your stupidest idea, but this Kate thing is a close second—“

“Mozzie!”

“What?”

Neal rubbed a hand over his face. He was exhausted. It had been a long day.

“Can you please keep looking?” he asked quietly.

There was a pause. Then Mozzie said, “Of course,” like it was the most obvious thing in the world.

Neal breathed a sigh of relief. “There is one other thing,” he said.

“You want me to set up my own cameras to spy on the Suit?” asked Mozzie.

“No,” Neal sputtered. He paused. Peter had specifically told him *not* to involve Mozzie in the Hagan case yet, but…he had also told him not to look for Kate, so… “I’m trying to – Peter and I are trying to find a property that might be linked to someone through a bunch of layers of disguise,” he said.
“Ah, is this the Dutchman case?” Mozzie sounded very interested all of a sudden.

“Yeah. You can’t talk about it to anyone, Moz. Promise?”

Mozzie practically squeaked. “Didn’t we just establish that you could trust—“

“Yeah, okay, sorry. So the Dutchman is Curtis Hagan.” Neal waited.

This time, Mozzie definitely squeaked. “Seriously? Hagan? You know, he’s in New York doing a __”

“Goya restoration. Yeah. And I was stupid, and he spotted me. So we need to figure out where he’s going to be printing these bonds. Can you see if you can shake anything loose?”

“Sure,” said Mozzie. “Okay, so we’re looking for a place big enough for a printing press, probably several, that’s out of the way and wouldn’t attract attention…maybe a warehouse of some kind…”

Mozzie trailed off, muttering to himself.

Neal waited a minute, and when Mozzie kept muttering, he interrupted. “Mozzie?”

“Yeah?”

“Thanks.” There was something incredibly comforting knowing he could rely on at least one person. Well, maybe he could rely on three, now. And wasn’t that a novel thought.

“Right,” said Mozzie. He cleared his throat. “Well, I’ll get on this and be in touch.”

The line went dead, and Neal tossed the phone onto the nightstand. It was weird, but sort of nice, to not have to hide it. He fell back onto the bed, resting his hands on his stomach and closing his eyes.

He was so tired, he thought maybe he could sleep through the night without having a nightmare. Maybe. Peter hadn’t said anything about staying again, so…maybe he was on his own.

And why did that make him feel so…

He brushed the feeling aside and pushed himself to his feet. He’d get ready for bed, read for a while, and try to sleep on his own.

Peter deserved a break.

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Monday, June 28, 10:20PM

Peter turned off the living room lamp and followed his wife up the stairs. He held back a groan as his muscular protested the movement. He probably should have gone to bed an hour ago, shouldn’t have pushed himself to stay up and watch the entire movie. But Neal was right, he needed to spend more time with El.

Not because he thought Neal was serious about his threat, but because she was his wife, and he had been entirely focused on a conman inmate for the past week. And she had been accommodating and understanding and hadn’t complained at all.

Ignoring the fatigue pains, he quickened his stride and caught up with her just as she entered the bedroom. He wrapped his arms around her waist from behind, and nuzzled her hair. She let out a little squeal of surprise, and then giggled.
“Have I told you yet today how much I love you?” he asked into her neck, placing a series of small kisses there.

“Mmmm, maybe once or twice,” she said, leaning back into his arms. “But you can tell me again, just to make sure.”

He spun her around and kissed her on the mouth. “I love you more than I love the Yankees,” he murmured against her lips.

She smiled. “Wow, that’s a declaration,” she said.

“I love you more than I love deviled ham,” he said. “More than I love catching criminals.”

“Well,” she chuckled softly, “let’s not go too crazy.”

He pulled back. “What, you don’t think I love you more than I love my job?”

“No, of course not.” She placed her hands on his cheeks. “I know you do. But it is possible to love more than one thing with all your heart. And you really really love your job.”

“Sure,” he said. He began walking her backwards toward the bed. “I do love working for the FBI,” step, “and figuring out a case like it’s a puzzle,” step, “and having a team of people under me who are smart,” step, “and feeling like I’m making a difference in the world,” step, “but….”

They reached the bed, and Peter lowered Elizabeth down, crawling over her.

“…figuring out the best ways to make you happy is also like a puzzle, you’re incredibly smart, and when you smile I feel like I don’t need another purpose.”

Peter lowered his head and kissed her, and she sighed.

“So it’s a tie, then?” she asked.

“I’d say you have the advantage,” said Peter. “You’re much more fun to look at than Hughes.”

She laughed and pulled him down for another kiss. “What about Neal?” she asked.

He pulled back and looked down at her, his brow wrinkling in confusion. “What about him?”

“He’s part of your job, and he’s pretty fun to look at.” Her eyes twinkled.

“I don’t…I guess so,” said Peter. “If you like that kind of thing.”

Elizabeth laughed. “Come on, Peter. I see you watching him. You think he’s hot.”

Peter felt his face go hot, and knew he was blushing. Damn it. “I have never once thought to myself, ‘Neal Caffrey is hot,’” he said.

“Because it would embarrass you to think it in those words,” said Elizabeth. “Admit it, though, you do think he’s good-looking.”

“Well, yeah,” said Peter. “I mean, I think that’s not a matter of opinion. He just is, empirically, attractive. Everyone thinks so.”

“You’ve talked about this with other people?” asked Elizabeth, grinning.
He stared at her, his mouth open. He knew she was teasing him, but he couldn’t figure out what the correct response was. Especially since…okay, yeah, he thought Neal was attractive. He had even told Neal that, at the Justice Facility. What was it he had said? *You’re certainly easy on the eyes.* But that was just an objective evaluation.

“Well, *I* think he’s hot,” said Elizabeth, patting his cheek.

Peter raised an eyebrow at her. “You do, do you?” he asked. “Maybe Neal wasn’t kidding when he said he was going to steal you from me.”

“He said that?” she looked delighted, and he rolled his eyes.

“He said you had a *great* time today.” Peter lowered himself to the bed beside Elizabeth, propping his head in one hand and resting the other on El’s stomach.

“We did,” she said. “He was a lovely companion.”

“So he *is* trying to steal you from me,” Peter grumbled. He didn’t really believe it, but he wanted her to think he did.

“Or maybe,” she said, twisting onto her side, facing him and mirroring his pose, her eyes dancing with amusement, “maybe *he* is trying to steal you from me. I mean, after all, he does have you sleeping in his bed every night.”

Peter frowned. “I’m sorry about that,” he said. “Maybe he’ll be fine tonight. I mean, after today—”

“After today he especially needs you,” said Elizabeth, shaking her head. “Peter, dreams are just our subconscious working out all the crap we’ve been taking in while we’re awake.”

“And you think he’ll have nightmares tonight?” asked Peter, his frown deepening.

“You don’t? I’d think *tonight* of all nights, he’s going to be working through a lot. He has been terrified for weeks, and today…we had fun, sure, but the entire time he was on a razor’s edge. You didn’t see him, hon,” she looked away, and Peter was shocked at the depth of emotion he caught flickering across her face. “You didn’t see him while he was waiting to hear from you. He was barely holding it together. I mean, he’s good – really good – at pretending. But he was struggling.”

Peter thought about it for a minute. “I screwed that up, I know,” he said, finally. “I should have called as soon as the hearing was over.”

“Well, you wanted to be with him when he got the news, share in his relief and joy,” she said softly. “That’s not so hard to understand, considering.”

“Considering what?”

Elizabeth rolled her eyes. “Considering how much you care about him.”

“I…” Peter tried to protest, but couldn’t. Clearly he cared about Neal. Hadn’t he been thinking about that all afternoon, and trying to come to terms with how much he seemed to care? That it went beyond simply having empathy for another human being? Hadn’t Judge Lawrence even seen it, when they were in her chambers? He sighed, and dropped his gaze.

“Hon.” Elizabeth reached out and grabbed Peter’s chin, forcing him to look at her. “You’ve cared about this kid for a long time. Remember how it was when you were chasing him? Because I do. It’s fine. It’s *good*. You wouldn’t be the man I love if you didn’t have the capacity to care the way
“I do care about him,” Peter said. “I don’t know why, but I do. I want him to… I want things to be okay for him.”

“Then they will be, because Peter Burke goes after what he wants until he gets it.” Elizabeth leaned in and kissed him. “Now, go. Make sure he has someone to turn to when it gets bad tonight.”

Peter felt the emotion welling up inside him and crowding into the corners of his eyes. He blinked, forcing it back. “You’re an amazing person,” he said.

She sat up, pulling Peter with her. “You know, I told Neal tonight, just before we got home, that you and I wanted him here and would fight to make sure he stayed. I said it exactly like that… we want him here. I meant it. Not just that we want to help him, but that we want him here. I think he needs to hear that, because he feels like he’s an incredible burden to us. One he will let us carry because he has no other choice, but he hates feeling like a burden. So just… make sure he knows you feel that way too.”

Peter thought back to Neal’s comment earlier about wanting to be useful, and the way he offered assistance whenever he could, the way he resisted being told to rest or let them take care of him, and he knew what El was saying was true.

It was also true – and it was a shock for Peter to admit it – that it was more than him wanting to save Neal from a death sentence for him. For years, he had kept close tabs on Neal in the work camp. Why? He didn’t really need to, he wanted to. He wanted to know what Neal was up to, how he was doing. That wasn’t normal agent to collar interest. And now…

Now that Neal was there, Peter realized, he liked having him there.

Peter brushed his teeth, kissed El good night, and then made his way down the hall to Neal’s room. The door was closed all the way, and Peter hesitated a moment. Maybe Neal was sending a message, that he didn’t want Peter to join him. Then again, the light was on; he could see it shining out from under the door.

He stood in the dark hall for a full minute, trying to decide, before lightly knocking on the door.

There was no answer.

Quietly, he eased the door open, and peeked inside. Neal was stretched out in the center of the bed, face down, the blankets loosely draped over the lower half of his body. There was a book next to his head, and his arms were drawn up, his hands buried under the pillow.

Peter smiled. He looked… at peace. And that made a warmth settle in his chest, that Neal could relax like that here.

He approached the bed, hating to wake Neal up, but needing to slide him over if he was going to join. He hesitated when he got closer, realizing that he could see the wounds on Neal’s arms, now that they weren’t covered in bandages anymore. He leaned in and looked more closely at Neal’s left arm.

There was a bit of puffiness, but the skin looked pink and new, with only a few tiny spots of broken skin. Neal was healing quickly.

He reached out and ran his fingers over the edge of the area, satisfied that it felt cool and dry. The antibiotics must have been working.
Neal stirred at the touch, moving slightly and turning his head to face Peter. He opened his eyes slowly, didn’t jerk away in fright. Also a good sign.

“Hi,” said Neal, his voice thick with sleep.

“Hi,” said Peter.

Neal shifted his body six inches to the right, pushing the book onto the floor as he went. He closed his eyes again. Peter smiled. Even half-asleep, Neal was making room for him, correctly understanding why Peter was there. When Peter didn’t immediately climb into the bed, Neal opened his eyes again.

“S’wrong?” he mumbled.

“Nothing,” said Peter. “I was just looking at your arms. It looks like you’re healing pretty well.”

“Mmm. Antibiotics. And that cream Elizabeth got for me.” He closed his eyes again. “Tired. Turn off the light?”

“In a minute,” said Peter. “Do you think I could look at the others? See how they’re doing?”

Neal frowned. “Now?”

“I guess not. It can wait until morning.” Peter made a move towards the nightstand and the lamp there, but Neal reached out and grabbed his arm.

“It’s okay. We’ll be in a hurry in the morning. You can look.” He wriggled until he was lying on his back, and kicked the covers down bit by bit. “As long as I can sleep while you do it.” Sure enough, he settled his hands on his stomach and closed his eyes.

Peter moved to the foot of the bed and sat. He pulled up the slightly too-long right pant leg first, examining the ankle wound there. Then he switched to the left. They looked even better than the arms, which made sense because they had been in better shape to begin with. But the wounds on Neal’s thighs, just above his knees, had been the worst.

“Neal?”

“Yeah?”

“I’m going to pull your pant legs further up, to see the other ones,” said Peter. “Is that okay?”

“Whatsoever you want, Peter.” Neal brought one of his arms up and flung it over his eyes. “Just do it so we can sleep.”

Peter paused a moment at Neal’s easy acquiescence. Usually he was more resistant to being taken care of. Peter chalked it up to being half asleep, and got to work. He edged Neal’s pant legs higher. Thankfully, the pajama pants were loose on Neal – since Peter was bigger anyway and Neal was still so thin from his confinement – so it was easy to pull them all the way up to where they needed to go.

Sure enough, the thigh wounds were not quite as healed as even Neal’s arms were, but they still looked good, considering. When Peter was satisfied, he pulled Neal’s pant legs back down, slowly. He couldn’t quite avoid having his fingers brush their way down Neal’s calves as he did so.

Neal let out a long sigh during this process, and Peter patted his foot.
“Okay,” he said. “Neal?”

“Mmhmm?”

“You want me to stay tonight?” Peter knew that wasn’t what Elizabeth meant for him to do when she sent him in here. She had wanted him to just be there, to show Neal they cared. But Peter felt like he had to ask.

“I moved over, didn’t I?” asked Neal. He removed his arm from his eyes and looked up at Peter. “You don’t have to. I…maybe I don’t need it tonight.”

“I want to.” As soon as the words were out, Peter knew he meant them. He wanted to be there. He swallowed. “So if it’s okay with you, maybe I need it tonight. I had a rough day.”

Neal blinked at him, his eyes an impossible shade of blue in the lamplight. They looked at each other for a long moment.

“What are you waiting for, then?” asked Neal, blinking rapidly. His voice was thick, but not from sleep.

Peter flicked off the lamp and slid onto the bed. Neal sat up and grabbed at the blankets, pulling them up over them both. Peter stiffened in surprise when Neal rolled over and curled into him, resting his palm on Peter’s chest.

“Sleep now,” said Neal, patting Peter softly. “I’ll watch over you.”

Peter let out a sigh, not unlike the one Neal had released a minute earlier. He moved his free arm up and laid his hand over Neal’s. Without really knowing what he intended, and let his fingers slide over Neal’s a few times before settling. Neal wriggled slightly beside him and then relaxed.

“Night, Peter,” said Neal, lips moving against Peter’s shoulder.

Peter waited a minute, letting his pulse settle and his throat open back up.

“Night, Neal,” he whispered.

This was okay. It was okay for him to care about another person, especially another person like Neal. It was okay for him to provide – and take – comfort from someone.

It was harmless. Right?
Disobeyed

Chapter Summary

Desperate times call for desperate measures.

Chapter 23: Disobeyed

Tuesday, June 29, 1:42PM

Neal ran his finger down a long column of numbers. His eyes were starting to ache and the figures were starting to blur, but he knew he was in the right area. If only he could find—

“Ha,” he said, triumphant.

He circled a figure on the page with flourish, going around it four times with his pencil. He threw the pencil down on the desk – his desk – and sat back in his chair, lacing his fingers together and grinning. He had just solved – in an hour – an embezzling case that had been sitting around the office for six months.

From the desk four feet away, Jones glanced up. He was on the phone, on hold, and he frowned at Neal. Neal pointed to the paperwork on his desk and waggled his eyebrows.

“It was the stepson,” Neal stage-whispered, in an exaggerated fashion. “Sloppy. I could have done it much better.”

Jones rolled his eyes, but smirked. He covered the mouthpiece of his phone. “Good work. Go tell Peter,” he said.

Neal looked up towards Peter’s office, the glass-enclosed sanctum at the top of the stairs. Peter was pacing, also on the phone. He didn’t look happy.

“Oh, I think I’ll give him a minute,” said Neal. “Coffee?”

Jones nodded, looking a little surprised. “Yeah, thanks.”

Neal rose and stretched, twisting his neck back and forth. He could feel the GPS collar tugging at his skin. He couldn’t seem to get used to it. He could always feel it. Even when, like now, it was fairly well hidden under his shirt collar and tie…he knew it was there, and whenever he felt it, his gut twisted slightly.

He pushed the feeling down and strode across the New York office of the FBI White Collar Crime Division to the small coffee counter. Neal would have rather gone downstairs and across the street to the coffee shop to get actual coffee, but at the moment his radius was set to the walls of the office. Maybe if he filled half the cup with cream, he could choke down the battery acid in the coffee pot.

As he fixed himself and Jones – and, on further thought, Peter – steaming cups, he thought over the day. The morning had been slightly rushed, since Peter had snoozed his alarm twice, grumbling and tightening his arms around Neal each time, while Neal lay in his warm embrace, unable to
escape and thoroughly confused about his lack of desire to do so.

Something had shifted there, and he didn’t know what. The night before, when Peter had come to bed, he had seemed...softer, somehow, checking his injuries with light brushes of fingers and then pretending that Peter needed Neal and not the other way around. Neal had been relieved when Peter had stayed, and without even meaning to, he had begun the night the way they usually ended it, draped all over Peter.

When they finally woke up, they sped through what Neal could easily imagine could become a morning routine: they had retreated into separate showers, dressed, and then met up with Elizabeth, who was waiting with coffee and bowls of cereal in the dining room. Neal had rinsed the breakfast dishes while Elizabeth gathered her things and Peter took Satchmo out back, and then, in a flurry of kisses, Elizabeth had flown out the door. Neal secured the back door, Peter set the alarm, and they were off.

It had been so easy. No one had had to tell Neal what to do, he just...stepped in and participated, as if he had been part of the Burke household for years.

Once at the FBI offices, Peter had taken Neal on a quick tour and introduced him to a handful of people, whose names Neal would remember perfectly and impress Peter with later. Then he had met Reese Hughes, Peter’s boss.

Hughes was tall, taller than Peter, and thin, with white hair and a shrewd, no-nonsense expression.

“So this is the legendary Neal Caffrey,” he had said, not bothering to stand when Peter and Neal entered his office.

“The one and only,” said Peter, smacking Neal on the shoulder.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, sir,” said Neal, stepping forward and offering his hand.

Hughes watched him for about twenty seconds – during which time Neal stood there, maintaining eye contact and keeping his hand out – and then rose to his full height. He gripped Neal’s hand and squeezed. Neal squeezed back, giving as good as he got.

Hughes nodded, and Neal thought he saw the corner of his mouth twitch up.

“Welcome to the FBI, Mr. Caffrey,” said Hughes. “I truly hope that you appreciate what Burke is doing for you here, and make it a priority to be useful to him, and to us.”

“I do, sir,” said Neal. “And I’ll do my best.”

Hughes sat and turned to some paperwork. Then he looked up. “Well? Get to it,” he said, waving a hand in dismissal.

Neal rather liked Reese Hughes.

Because there were no developments on the Hagan case yet, Peter had set Neal up at an empty desk in the bullpen and handed him a stack of files.

“Mortgage fraud and embezzlement,” he said. “The bread and butter of the White Collar Division. These have been sitting around a while and are getting cold. See if you can spot anything others have missed.”

“You want me to check your work?” Neal had said, raising an eyebrow. “Peter, I wouldn’t want to
make you look bad.”

“Oh, these aren’t my cases,” said Peter. “I’ve never looked at them. And if you’re as good as you think you are, maybe I won’t have to. Jones will get you set up on the computer. Don’t make any phone calls. Have fun.” He reached out and ruffled Neal’s hair before Neal could duck out of the way, and retreated up the stairs to his office.

Neal had put his head down to hide his blush, and then got to work. Several hours later, he had worked his way through the entire stack, solving four cases and having some good leads on two others.

He felt good. Like this was something he could do. He was good at it. Maybe not like he was good at picking locks or mimicking the great masters, but good in a different way.

Neal was brought out of his thoughts by the buzzing of the phone in his left pocket. The burner. He pulled it out, and read the text message. He smiled.

He finished stirring the coffees, deposited Jones’ on his desk, and continued up the stairs to Peter’s office. When he got there, he knocked lightly on the glass.

Peter turned, still on the phone, and waved Neal in.

Neal set Peter’s coffee on his desk and sat in one of the visitor chairs, settling in to wait for Peter to be done with his call.

“No, I understand that,” Peter was saying. “Thanks for letting me know.”

He sank into his desk chair, returned the phone to its cradle, and paused, staring off into the distance. Suddenly, he slammed his hand down on the desk.

“Damn it,” he growled.

Neal jumped, barely managing not to slosh his coffee over the rim of its mug. Peter focused on Neal, and shook his head, his features softening slightly.

“Sorry,” he said. He glanced at the coffee. “Thanks for bringing that.”

Neal nodded. “What’s up?” he asked cautiously.

Peter rubbed a hand over his face. “Just…tell me how you’re doing. Make any progress on those cold files?”

Neal preened. “I did,” he said. “Solved four of them, and have got a couple of threads for someone to tug on the other two.”

Peter blinked. “Seriously? You solved four of them? Just like that? How?”

Neal set his mug on Peter’s desk and grinned. “I’ll show you. You have a quarter?”

Peter reached into his pocket and pulled out some change. He flipped a quarter at Neal, who caught it in an overhand grab. He flattened his right palm with the quarter in it, and held it towards Peter.

“Okay, see this?”

Peter nodded. Neal drew his left hand over his right palm, pretending to take the quarter. In reality, he kept the quarter in his right hand, slipped between his middle and ring fingers, and brought it
back to drop into his pocket, while flourishing with his left hand. He opened his left hand to reveal an empty palm.

“Where’s the quarter?” asked Neal.

Peter narrowed his eyes. “In your right pocket,” he said.

Neal pulled the quarter out and spun it on the desk. “How did you know?”

“I…” Peter rolled his eyes. “I followed the money. Cute.”

“I can fill you in, show you what I found,” said Neal. “But what was the call about?”


Neal froze. *Damn it,* indeed. “It’s because he made me,” he said. “Shit, I should never have gone to that church.”

“Don’t be too hard on yourself,” said Peter. “We had to go. If we hadn’t gone, we wouldn’t be so sure he’s the Dutchman.”

“Well,” said Neal. “Spain. That’s something, right?”

“It’s something, but not much,” said Peter. “We need to find where he’s printing. If he’s even doing it now. Maybe he’s still gathering supplies.”

“When is he leaving?” asked Neal.

“Four days,” said Peter.

“Four days,” muttered Neal. “Why is it always *four days*?”

“What?” asked Peter.

“Nothing,” said Neal. He had been thinking that the last time he asked Peter how long he had – in the Justice Facility – it had also been four days.

“Well, I think it’s time for you to reach out to your contacts,” said Peter. “Our team hasn’t found a thing, and we can’t afford to wait.”

“Ah, sure. Right,” said Neal. “My contacts. I can do that. I’ll get right on it.”

He stood, grabbed up his mug of coffee sludge – because it truly couldn’t be called *coffee* – and turned to the door.

“Neal.” Peter’s voice, full of stern warning, stopped Neal short.

“Yeah?” He didn’t turn around, left his hand on the door.

“Neal.” Peter sighed. “You already reached out, didn’t you?”

Neal took a breath, and then turned around, putting on his most *aw shucks* sheepish look. He shrugged. “*I may* have made one tiny inquiry. Miniscule, really.”

“After I specifically told you to wait?”

“I…yes. After you told me to wait.” Neal shrank a little at the look on Peter’s face. Peter looked
like he was trying to decide between strangling Neal and…doing something else that might have been worse.

Peter stood. “Come with me. Leave the coffee.”

Neal felt a shiver of unease as he put the coffee back on Peter’s desk and followed the man out of the office. Peter descended the stairs and crossed to a back hallway. Neal hurried after him, since Peter’s long strides were eating up ground quickly. Where was Peter taking him?

Peter finally stopped in front of a door and pushed it open. He waved Neal inside.

It was an interrogation room. Neal was familiar with these, having sat in them over and over when he had first been arrested. It was a small room, with a simple rectangular table in the center, two hard plastic chairs on one side and one chair on the other. One of the walls, the one opposite the single chair, was a mirror that Neal knew was two-way; people on the other side could see in. The lighting was harsh and fluorescent. It was an uncomfortable place, on purpose.

Peter closed the door behind them and gestured to the single chair.

“Sit,” he said.

Neal hesitated. What was Peter about to do? He glanced over his shoulder. He didn’t think the door had locked behind them. He wondered what Peter would do if he just turned and walked out?

“Neal,” said Peter. His voice had softened, and he took a step toward Neal. His hand landed on Neal’s arm. “Just have a seat, please.”

Neal swallowed, and before he had consciously made a decision, he was moving around the table, pulling out the chair, and sitting. He tried to slouch back in the chair casually, but couldn’t seem to manage it. He sat forward, forearms on the table, knee jiggling, bouncing slightly.

He hadn’t even had much of that coffee, but he felt like he was going to vibrate himself off the chair. He took a slow breath, steadying his foot, and flattened his palms on the cool surface of the table.

*There. Better.*

Peter watched him carefully the entire time he was settling himself, brow creased and arms folded. He didn’t sit, but stood on the far side of the room. When Neal was finally still, he spoke.

“Are you nervous?” he asked.

“I’m…no,” said Neal. “Why would I be nervous?”

Peter shrugged. “Sometimes people are nervous when they’ve done something they’re not supposed to do. Especially when they’ve been caught. I thought maybe that’s how you were feeling.”

Neal let out a breath. “I…”

Peter moved forward, pulled out a chair. He slid into it, folding his hands on the table in front of him. “Neal. There’s no need to be nervous. I brought you in here because I wanted to talk to you, without anyone watching or listening in.”

Neal’s eyes darted to the two-way mirror, and then back to Peter.
“There’s no one in there. I promise,” Peter said. “I’d appreciate it if you were honest with me. That’s the only way this is ever going to work, you know.”

Neal considered that. He was mostly honest with Peter. About the things that made a difference to Peter, anyway. So he nodded.

“Okay. So. Are you nervous?” asked Peter.

Suddenly, Neal’s perspective shifted. Peter was a pro. An absolute pro. The last time they had been in an interrogation room together, after Peter had caught him, had been…well, a little scary, since he knew he was facing a lot of charges. But it had also been exhilarating, going toe-to-toe with the smartest law enforcement agent he had even known. It had almost been a choreographed dance, the way they made moves around each other, pushing and pulling.

In the end, he had gotten a four-year sentence, so maybe Peter had won. On the other hand, there were a ton of charges that didn’t stick…so maybe it was a draw. Here they were again. A rematch? With different stakes, this time. Both more and less on the line.

Okay, so if Peter was going to be the good cop here, what was Neal’s role? He was the obedient slave? Or the brilliant criminal who Peter loved to chase? Maybe there was a way to be both at the same time.

He licked his lips, showing a bit of the nerves he was actually experiencing. “A little,” he said. He glanced around the room, and then flashed a grin. “This is not my first time in an interrogation room with you, you know, and last time I ended up in a work camp for four years.”

Something passed through Peter’s eyes at that point. A memory? A victory? A regret? Maybe a mixture of the three.

“True,” said Peter. “The difference is that this time, I’m on your side.”

That threw Neal a moment. “You are?”

“Of course,” said Peter. “You can’t tell?”

“Then what do you want to talk about?” asked Neal. “If you’re on my side, whatever side that is at the moment.”

Peter rolled his eyes. “It’s the side that’s trying to keep you alive, you idiot.” He smiled and shook his head. “No matter how much you try to sabotage that.”

Neal sat back. “Sabotage? I’m not trying to sabotage anything. I just solved four cases for you to demonstrate how useful I can be to this office.”

“Right. And you also keep doing things behind my back, even though I explicitly instruct you otherwise. Neal,” Peter rubbed a hand over his face, “we both know that this is an unusual situation. I’m not trying to buy your Contract so that I can own you, not in the sense that most private buyers would be.”

“I appreciate that, Peter,” said Neal.

“But even so,” Peter continued, “I have to be in charge, here. I have to set the rules. You have to run everything by me.”

Neal folded his arms across his chest. “That sounds an awful lot like you want to own me, no
matter how much you say you don’t.”

Peter pushed his chair back and stood. He began to pace the small space, and Neal followed him as he marked out his repetitive route.

“Okay. This is the deal. First, in order for us to even get to the point where I own your Contract, we’ve got to be careful. Everything has to be by the book.”

“I get that,” said Neal.

“No, you don’t,” said Peter, turning to fasten a stare on Neal that made him squirm. “You say you do, but then you let a friend pass you a burner phone, and you have him go looking for Kate – which I specifically told you to let me handle, not that you’re going to listen – and you ask Haversham to look into Hagan before I’ve agreed to it, and probably a million other things I don’t even know about yet.”

“Peter, I swear I haven’t done anything—“

“That’s what I’m talking about,” said Peter, throwing his hands in the air. “You have. You’ve been doing things since the day I brought you home. But you deny it because, in your mind, it’s justified so it doesn’t really count.”

Neal clenched his jaw. Peter sort of had a point, but he wasn’t about to acknowledge that. Yet.

“It all counts, Neal. It all counts. At least right now.”

“Okay, Peter,” said Neal. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have contacted my friend without you agreeing to it.”

Peter was silent for a moment, watching him. Then he nodded. “Okay,” he said.

“But he’s already come through, and since we’re on a short timetable now, isn’t it good that I—“

“Neal!”

Neal sighed. “Yeah, all right, I’m justifying again.”

Peter collapsed back into his seat, ran a hand through his hair. When he spoke again, his tone was urgent.

“You know, it’s not just things you do behind my back. It’s you hiding that you’re hurting, or that you need help. Didn’t we go over this when you nearly got run down by that car? You’ve got to be honest with me. You can disagree with me. I want you to speak up if you disagree. Try to convince me. I wanted you because you’re so smart, and I respect that you have ideas and opinions that might be different than mine. Maybe even better than mine. Every once in a great while.”

Neal was having trouble digesting that speech. Peter thought that Neal might be right sometimes? That he was smart? Sure, okay, that made sense. But…Peter…wanted him because he was smart? Wanted him? Not just because he felt bad or guilty and wanted to save some poor schmuck’s life?

Did it matter to Peter that it was Neal? Would he not have done this for someone else?

While Neal tried to sort all of this out, Peter kept talking. “The trouble is, Neal…you keep doing this stuff because you’re so damned lucky and clever that it works out for you more often than not, and so you don’t have to pay the consequences. So I’m afraid you’re just going to keep doing
things and it’s going to catch up with you. That scares me. It fucking terrifies me.”

Neal clenched his hands into fists. Peter sounded so…distressed. Like it was really, honestly, affecting him on a personal level. He found he couldn’t quite respond, so he just sat there, staring at the table, his stomach in uncomfortable knots. Was that guilt?

Peter sighed. “Don’t forget. It almost did catch up with you. It might still, if we don’t keep it together and stay on the same side, here.” Peter’s hand shot out and grabbed one of Neal’s gripping it tight. “Just…talk to me. And trust that, when I tell you to do something, or not to do something, I have a really good reason.”

Neal swallowed. He was losing this rematch. But maybe that was a good thing.

After a minute, he turned his hand in Peter’s so that their palms were resting against each other. He focused on that point of warmth for a moment before raising his eyes to Peter’s. He nodded.

“Yeah,” he said. “Okay. I’ll talk to you. Whatever you want, I promise.”

Peter frowned. “That’s the third time you’ve said that in two days. Is ‘whatever you want’ another version of ‘I’m fine’? Where you’re just saying what you want me to hear?”

Neal let out burst of air that might have been a laugh if he didn’t feel so unsteady. “No. It’s…I do say ‘I’m fine’ when I’m really not. You caught that, did you?”

“Neal, where you’re concerned, I try to catch everything.”

Neal shook his head, amazed. Somehow, Peter had manipulated Neal from a position of distrust and opposition to honestly wanting to do whatever Peter asked, if he would just stop looking so distressed.

The scariest part was that he wasn’t entirely sure it was a manipulation.

“I’m on board, okay? I’ll try to stop doing things on my own.”

Peter squeezed Neal’s hand once, then released it and sat back. “All right,” he said. “I’ll take it. Now…” He smiled, and his eyes sparkled. “Tell me what Haversham dug up on Hagan.”

Grinning, and so utterly relieved that was over he felt like he could conquer anything, Neal pulled his burner phone out of his pocket.

“He sent me this address…”

* WC – WC – WC – WC – WC – WC – WC *

Tuesday, June 29, 4:40PM

Peter hung up the phone and sighed. Neal looked up at him expectantly from the chair on the other side of his desk. Peter hesitated a moment, knowing this was going to upset Neal, but there was no help for it. He shook his head.

“What?” asked Neal. “I don’t get it. Why won’t they give us the warrant? Those printing presses are in that warehouse. Hagan is printing the bonds right at this second. He’s going to finish sometime in the next three days.”

“I know,” said Peter.
“If Hagan gets on that plane…”

“Neal, I know.”

“What more do they need?” asked Neal. “How can we get it? We know he’s in there. They know it. We—”

“Neal, it’s the law,” said Peter. “Believe it or not, it’s there to protect you…well, not so much to protect you, but to protect law-abiding citizens who deserve a right to privacy.”

“Hey,” said Neal, momentarily distracted from the problem at hand. “I’m law-abiding. At the moment.”

“There are procedures in place. It’s a pretty high hurdle to get onto someone’s private property and conduct a search. You need a reasonable suspicion that there is evidence of a crime to be found, and that reasonable suspicion has to be based on specific facts, not just a hunch,” Peter explained.

“It’s not a hunch. We heard the printing presses,” said Neal.

“Yes, but they could be anyone’s printing presses doing perfectly legal things. The owner of record on that building, and the tenant on the lease, have no articulated relationship to Hagan.” Peter blew out a frustrated breath. “What it boils down to is that right now, we have more than a hunch, but not enough specific facts. We would need the actual link between Hagan and the warehouse, not just a rumor your friend picked up on the streets.”

“This is bullshit,” Neal muttered.

Peter watched him. He looked on edge again, which was worrisome. After their conversation earlier, Peter had hoped that Neal would settle and trust him. And it had worked, for a while.

They had gone out to the address Haversham had sent to Neal. Sure enough, they could hear printing presses working inside. At least, that’s what Neal said they were, and he relied upon Neal’s expertise in terms of what printing presses sounded like.

The trouble was, as Peter had explained to Neal, there was no way to link the warehouse to Hagan, and thus no way to link the operation of printing presses to Hagan. His people were on it, but even with the target property they were having trouble making the link. Maybe with a few more days, they could get it done…but Peter was worried they didn’t have a few more days.

Now, Neal was jiggling his knee again, drumming his fingers on the desk. He looked like he was going to bounce himself right out of the room.

“You’re right,” said Peter. “It is bullshit.”

Neal looked at him in surprise.

Peter stood, and came around to the other side of the desk. He sat in the chair next to Neal, so that there was no longer a desk between them. He reached out and settled a hand on the back of Neal’s neck, squeezed lightly. Neal immediately stilled, and Peter began to speak in soothing tones.

“That’s good,” he said. “Let’s not panic. There’s still a little time. Could you reach out to your friend again? See if he could give you information on where he got the address?”

Neal bit his lower lip, and Peter resisted the urge smooth the bite with his finger.
“I don’t think so,” said Neal. “I can ask, and Moz…Haversham will want to help, but it’s unlikely we’ll get anywhere. He *might* be willing to give up his source, to help me, but they aren’t going to be willing to talk to us. And it would sort of screw Haversham.”

“I don’t know what else to try,” said Peter. “Okay, you know what? It’s been a productive day. Why don’t we call it and head home. We can talk more about it there, once we’ve had a chance to let it settle. We can pick up something for dinner, or make something, if you want, surprise Elizabeth.”

Neal let out a breath. “Sure,” he said. His eyes flickered to Peter and then back out the window. “Speaking of surprising Elizabeth, I was wondering if you could help me with something.”

Peter frowned. “Help you with what?” he asked.

“Well, since I’m living in your house and all, I thought I should get her a present. For her birthday. But I kind of don’t have any cash, so—”

Peter smacked a hand on his forehead. “Crap,” he said. “How do I do this every damned time?”

Neal smirked at him. “You forgot. That her birthday is tomorrow. After I reminded you last week.”

“I’ve been a little distracted,” said Peter. He squeezed Neal’s neck once more and then released it and stood. “Okay, new plan. You help me figure out what to get her, we go get it. *Then* we go home and get dinner ready.”

As Peter gather his things, he hoped that maybe a little gift-shopping would let Neal – and Peter himself – get their minds off the Hagan case long enough to come up with a solution.

* WC – WC – WC – WC – WC – WC – WC *

*WC – WC – WC – WC – WC – WC – WC*

*Wednesday, June 30, 5:32AM*

Neal picked his way down the staircase, practically holding his breath. He kept one eye out for Satchmo, but didn’t see him anywhere. Neal knew that the dog had been sleeping in Peter and Elizabeth’s room, and hoped he was too comfortable to investigate someone moving through the house.

He had barely managed to slip out of Peter’s arms without fully waking the man. Peter was certainly getting used to holding onto Neal for dear life while he slept. He had opened his eyes for a second as Neal had pulled away, grumbling, and Neal had whispered “bathroom.” Peter had frowned deeply, and grumbled some more, but drifted back to sleep, leaving Neal to his own devices.

After that, he had dressed as quickly as he could in the clothes he had stashed in the bathroom hamper the night before, and was trying to make his exit.

The sun had just begun to rise, casting long, grey shadows throughout the house. That was good. In a while, the house – and the neighborhood – would be awash with golden light. Neal was hoping to be long gone by the time any neighbors might glance outside and see him.

Once in the foyer, he placed his shoes down and slipped into them. He grabbed Elizabeth’s car keys from the bowl on the console table and took a deep breath. He had one more thing to do before he walked out the door.

Neal crept over to the living room coffee table and gently set down the hardcover book he was
holding, directly in the center. He had folded down a page in the middle. He hoped Peter would notice it before he jumped to the wrong conclusion.

Once out on the front stoop, the door securely closed behind him, Neal took a deep breath. He knew that, as soon as he stepped over the boundary, the GPS collar was going to start its periodic shocks. He could only pray that Peter had left the settings at their reduced level, four minutes between shocks, starting out as low as possible and increasing minutely.

Within thirty seconds, an alarm would go off on Peter’s phone, and Peter would realize Neal was gone.

He figured, if the first shocks weren’t too bad, he could manage to get to Elizabeth’s car and drive away. He figured, if the settings were still lowered, he had a decent chance of getting where he needed to be and doing what he needed to do before the shocks completely incapacitated him, or slowed him down so much that Peter would catch him too early. He sent up a quick prayer that he was right.

He hesitated at the edge of the bottom step. He wasn’t stupid. He knew he was about to do exactly what he had promised Peter he would stop doing: acting on his own. But in this instance, he had to act on his own. It wouldn’t work if he told Peter about it. He wondered if maybe he should have told Elizabeth, but dismissed the idea immediately. She would have put a stop to it, too concerned for Neal’s safety.

And wasn’t that an odd feeling, knowing that someone was so concerned about him.

Well, Neal had lived his life by taking big risks. He had received big rewards by doing so. This was just another big risk, and the reward was huge. If he succeeded, he was pretty sure Peter would be able to buy his Contract from Friedrich. That would be an incredible reward, one he’d gladly take an even bigger risk to secure. If he failed…well, better not think too hard about that.

There was also the possibility that, even if he succeeded, Peter would change his mind and decide Neal wasn’t worth it. Maybe Peter would give him back to Friedrich and wash his hands of the whole thing.

No. Peter wanted him. Peter wanted him. He had said so. Neal just needed to trust in that.

Neal swallowed a huge dose of paralyzing fear and stepped over the boundary.
Chapter Summary

Neal runs on the GPS collar, but it's not what Peter thinks.

Chapter 24: Shocked

Wednesday, June 30, 5:40AM

At the sound of the alarm, Peter groaned and reached blindly for his phone on the nightstand. He tapped at the screen, trying to snooze it. He just needed another few minutes.

The alarm wasn’t stopping, however. Instead, it was getting louder. Peter grabbed his pillow and shoved it over his head, burrowing into the blankets. He reached to his right, searching for Neal, and found only cool sheets.

Alarm – Neal – Alarm.

Peter threw the pillow aside and pushed himself up. The room was still mostly dark, meaning the sun hadn’t quite risen. Too early for the alarm he had set.

He grabbed his phone, peered at the screen, and his heart stopped.

Minutes later, he was bursting into his and El’s bedroom, tripping over Satchmo, who let out a surprised yelp. He went straight for the closet, grabbing pants and a shirt and tearing at his pajamas to get them off. He had already wasted precious time running down the stairs and out of the house, looking wildly around for Neal.

“El,” he called. “Elizabeth.”

She grunted.

“Elizabeth, wake up,” he said, yanking his shirt over his head.

In the bed, she propped herself up on her elbows and blinked at him. “What’s going on?” she asked.

“It’s Neal,” said Peter. “He ran.”

He grabbed his wallet from the dresser and shoved it into his pocket, then slid his leather shoulder holster on, buckling the straps.

“He ran? Peter, he can’t…are you sure? How? Why?” She climbed off the bed, running fingers through her hair and looking for her slippers.

“I don’t know,” he said. “Damn it.” He jammed his gun into the holster, then grabbed a pair of socks from the drawer.

“That doesn’t make any sense—“ Elizabeth was saying when Peter pushed past Satchmo and charged for the first floor.
He skipped the last two stairs, landing hard in the foyer. He glanced around, looking for some
evidence of...a reason. Anything to explain why Neal would have attempted an escape when he
knew it was impossible on the GPS collar.

Well, not completely impossible. If Neal got far enough away from New York, the signal would
have to be picked up by another monitoring location, and that could take time. Time he could use
to get the collar off. The shocks would incapacitate him before he got far enough, but if he had help...

When he picked up his keys from the bowl on the console, he realized they were the only keys in
there. Elizabeth’s were missing.

“Fuck,” he said.

“Okay, calm down.” Elizabeth hurried down the stairs. She had pulled on a robe and put her hair
into a ponytail.

“He took your car,” said Peter, gritting his teeth. “Damn it, Neal.”

“Hon, I don’t understand. Why would he run?” Elizabeth moved into the living room, pulled back
the curtains to peer outside.

Peter shook his head. “I don’t know. He must have gotten spooked since we might lose Hagan.
Panicked. He does stupid things when he’s backed into a corner. But we talked yesterday, and I
thought…” He ran a hand over his face. “…I thought he was okay.”

Peter couldn’t afford to waste time dealing with the shock and betrayal he was feeling. He had
thought that they were developing something. A friendship. Maybe, if they succeeded in the
arbitration, a partnership. He had allowed himself to look forward to that, to working and living
beside Neal, getting the chance to know him and learn all his secrets. After their conversation the
day before, he had really thought Neal wanted that, too. If he couldn’t be absolutely free, he
thought Neal liked the idea of working with Peter.

He guessed he had been wrong. And now, his visions of working with Neal were going up in
smoke. When he caught the kid – and he would, he had no doubt – he was never going to be
allowed to keep him, not after Neal had attempted an escape.

“Peter…”

“Friedrich is going to insist he be locked up again. We might lose the arbitration. He wants to be
away from us so bad he’s willing to risk—“ Peter broke off, shoving the emotions down as deep as
they would go. “Never mind. I’m going to go catch him. And then I’m going to kill him.”

“Peter. Come here.”

Peter looked over at his wife, who was standing at the coffee table, holding up a book. He peered
at it. Warrant Law, it said on the cover. He glanced at the bookshelf, noted the gap where it
usually lived.

He felt a spark light up in his chest. It felt like hope.

“Where did you find that?” he asked.

“On the coffee table. I think you should look at the marked page.” She held out the book. “Then go
get our boy.”
He nodded. “Call everyone,” he said. He grabbed up a pen and notepad, scribbling down an address. “Tell them to meet me here.”

* WC – WC – WC – WC – WC – WC – WC *

**Wednesday, June 30, 5:43AM**

The first shock hadn’t been too bad. When Neal had crossed the boundary it hit, but it was small. No more than a slight twinge, like touching a light switch after walking across a carpet.

A mere warning.

He had run for Elizabeth’s car, knowing he had very little time – maybe two or three minutes – before Peter was out the door behind him.

He really hoped Peter would figure things out. He hated imagining that Peter would be thinking Neal had been running away from him and what he was offering. There was no help for that at first, but if Peter found the Warrant Law book, saw the page he marked on “exigent circumstances,” he’d know. And then he’d play his part.

He really really hoped Peter knew he wouldn’t run away from him.

It was what Neal had realized the night before, while he had curled up in the chair in his room, skimming the law book. If he couldn’t be totally, one-hundred-percent free, the best-case scenario was to be with the Burkes. He didn’t want to run now because he didn’t want to be on the run. If he stayed with the Burkes, he could be really free in four years. Maybe sooner. And that wasn’t so bad, considering the alternative.

Now, Neal glanced at the clock on Elizabeth’s dashboard. He was about to get his second shock. He slowed the car, pulled over to the side. There wasn’t much traffic around him, but he didn’t want to take any chances.

When it came, he gasped.

Okay, that was still warning-level, but apparently the minimal-increase settings were still a substantial increase. He hoped he’d be able to do what he needed to do before they got really bad.

He pulled back into the street and punched the gas. He was close. Hagan’s warehouse wasn’t that far from the Burkes’ house in Brooklyn, so he should be able to make it before the next four-minute interval passed. That is, assuming Peter had figured out what was going on and wasn’t going to increase the settings.

Neal’s phone rang in his pocket, but he ignored it.

* WC – WC – WC – WC – WC – WC – WC *

**Wednesday, June 30, 5:44AM**

Peter ran a red light, siren whooping, and threw his phone on the seat beside him when Neal didn’t pick up. He hadn’t really expected him to, but part of him wished he would.

His phone rang, and he scooped it up.

“Burke,” he said.

“We’re on our way, and we’ve called in local law enforcement for backup.” Diana’s voice came
over the line, clear and strong.

“Great,” said Peter. “Thank you. What’s your ETA?”

“About twelve minutes,” she said. “I was already up and dressed. Jones is also on his way, he might be a few more minutes. Peter, are you sure this is where he’s headed?”

“I’m positive,” said Peter. He had the GPS app open on his phone, and took another glance. The little green dot was steadily moving towards the navy yard, and the warehouse wasn’t far from there.

He understood Neal’s plan.

When Peter had seen the law book, he had immediately guessed what Neal might have been thinking. And the fact that the book was out, for him to find, with the “exigent circumstances” page marked…Neal wanted him to see it, wanted him to figure it out, without actually telling him.

This was…delicate in so many ways. Neal was “running” so that Peter would pursue him into the warehouse, thereby giving law enforcement a reason to be inside without a warrant. He couldn’t tell Peter his plan explicitly, because then Peter wouldn’t be pursuing him as a fleeing inmate; then, it would be a preconceived plan that would destroy the exigent circumstances exception. Since Peter actually knew this is what Neal planned, did that destroy the exigent circumstances exception?

He decided it didn’t. No matter what Peter thought he knew about Neal’s intentions, he didn’t know for sure. Moreover, Neal was in danger, both because of what he was walking into, and because that GPS collar would be delivering increasingly strong shocks as the minutes ticked by.

Peter hated to think about Neal enduring that.

He could stop the shocks, but then he was eliminating one of his justifications for following Neal into the warehouse. He couldn’t risk screwing up their chance to take Hagan down, not when they would have to deal with the fallout of Neal running one way or the other. He had to stay the course, to make the risk worth it.

Peter was on board. He was furious with Neal for once again acting on his own. He was panicked that he wouldn’t get to Neal in time, and Hagan would shoot him, or the collar would do real damage. He was distraught at the impact that this could have on his chance to buy Neal’s Contract. And…maybe he was a little proud of Neal for his quick research and clever thinking.

So he was on board.

He just wished there had been another way.

* WC – WC – WC – WC – WC – WC *

**Wednesday, June 30, 5:47AM**

Neal pulled over in front of Hagan’s warehouse. His third shock was about to hit any second, so he stayed put and waited it out.

The third shock made him cry out. A small cry, but a cry nonetheless. He was on the clock, now. Peter – and probably local law enforcement – would be right behind.

He slid out of the car, locked the doors, and strolled towards the warehouse. There was a burly guy
in a black trench coat, carrying a semi-automatic weapon, standing near one of the doors. Yeah, an innocent tenant has an armed guard posted at a crappy old warehouse before six in the morning. Hagan was definitely in there.

In a burst of inspiration, he had grabbed Elizabeth’s camera from the shelf in the guestroom, and now he lifted the viewfinder to his eye and began to take pictures of the warehouse. He knelt down, stood up, adjusted the zoom, anything to make a show of the fact that he was taking pictures.

It worked. The guard walked toward him.

“Hey,” he said. “What do you think you’re doing?”

“Oh, hi,” said Neal. “I’m taking a photography class at the Annex, and they love shots of dilapidated warehouses, rusty dumpsters, you know. Grit. That’s what they want, these days.”

He raised the camera and took a picture of the guard.

The guard reached him and grabbed the camera. He threw it on the ground, where it broke into a dozen pieces.

Sorry, Elizabeth, thought Neal.

The guard grabbed Neal by his arm and dragged him toward the warehouse. Neal reached up and adjusted his shirt collar, making sure it covered his GPS collar. Within moments, they were inside.

Jackpot, thought Neal. He looked around at several men operating four printing presses going full speed, with piles of the Snow White books off to the side, and boxes of freshly printed bonds being sealed and stacked.

Now, he just needed to find a way to hide out until Peter arrived. With five guys looking at him, this was going to be a challenge.

He spotted a glass-enclosed office towards the back of the warehouse. Maybe he was about to get lucky, and that glass was bullet proof. If he could get inside…

“What the hell?” One of the other men strode towards them. “Who is this?”

The guard who had Neal’s arm in an iron grip shrugged. “He was snooping around outside.”

“So you brought him in? Hagan’s going to kill you.”

Hagan is here. Neal felt a surge of triumph, and then remembered he was in a rather precarious situation. He wondered how much time he had before the collar shocked him again. Maybe a minute?

“Stick him in the office, I’ll get the boss,” said the other guy. The guard dragged Neal to the glass enclosure, and shoved him in.

Neal immediately pulled the door closed. He twisted the lock, effectively locking everyone else out, just as Hagan came around the corner.

“You,” said Hagan. “I’m going to kill you.” He reached for the door, yanked at it. “Someone get me a goddamned key,” he shouted, throwing his hands up in the air.

The fourth shock hit, and Neal stumbled backwards, hips hitting the desk behind him. The shocks
were lasting longer now, sustaining the charge, and increasing the intensity.

Right, okay. He might have two more of those in him, maybe three, before he was down for the count. It might be sooner that Hagan found a key and got into the room. What could he do to pass the time? Leave a note for Peter, maybe?

He grinned as his eyes fell on a safe in the corner. He stretched out his fingers and got to work.

* WC – WC – WC – WC – WC – WC – WC *

**Wednesday, June 30, 5:54AM**

Peter pulled to a stop in front of the warehouse. He spotted Elizabeth’s car and let out a sigh of relief. The GPS showed that Neal was there, but the car was a nice confirmation.

He had pulled the light and turned off the siren a block away, not wanting to alert anyone to his presence just yet. He couldn’t go charging in alone, he needed some back up. Diana would be there in two or three minutes. Local PD possibly sooner. He just needed to be patient.

He wondered how many shocks Neal had undergone. Four, maybe five? He wondered how strong they were. Based on their accidental experiment, and Neal’s reaction, he thought that those shocks had started somewhere near where or fourth shock was on the “friendlier” settings, and Neal had quickly been in pain.

Now that he was here, should he turn off the collar? On the one hand, if Neal was in trouble in there, the shocks would make it harder for him to defend himself. On the other hand, if he turned it off now, it would be harder to justify that he was pursuing Neal into the building. He clenched his teeth and left it on. As soon as they were inside the building, and not a second later, he’d turn it off.

Until then, he had to give Neal the benefit of the doubt. The kid had taken a huge risk, knowing what he was walking into. He had to trust that Neal could manage, and not screw up their chances of making this work.

He heard sirens approaching, and got out of the car. Three squad cars pulled in, followed closely by Diana’s black sedan. S.W.A.T. piled out of the squad cars.

Peter spotted an officer who looked like he was in charge, and pulled his badge out.

“Peter Burke, F.B.I.,” he said. “Here’s the deal. We have an inmate inside that building, and we are going in to get him. He’s on a GPS collar and may be incapacitated by now. He will be unarmed, and he is not dangerous. Do not shoot. We also suspect that there are a number of hostiles inside the building.”

The officer nodded. “The men are at your disposal, sir. On your word.”

Peter looked up and down the line, and nodded. “They’re your men,” he said. “Lead the way.”

Diana reached his side just as they heard gunfire coming from inside the warehouse. He froze a moment, sickness turning his stomach over.

“I need you to get an E.M.S. team here immediately,” he said.

“On it, boss.” She pulled out her phone as they approached the warehouse.

He pulled up the GPS app, and as soon as S.W.A.T. was through the doors, he shut off the shocks.
Neal curled on the floor behind the desk. He could hear Hagan yelling about losing the key, and telling them to break down the door. It wouldn’t be long now before they made it inside. Where was Peter? He’d been here long enough for Peter to catch up with him.

Maybe Peter wasn’t coming. Maybe he was so angry with Neal for running that he decided to let someone else handle it, and it was taking them longer. Maybe…

Neal pushed the thoughts aside. Peter would come, but he would do it smart. He wouldn’t just charge in. He’d wait for backup. He’d want everything to be in their favor.

The fifth shock hit. It felt like it went on and on. He let out a full moan and closed his eyes, willing the pain to fade.

When he heard the gunshots, he thought it might be all over.

Peter looked around the warehouse frantically. Local PD was restraining several men, who were surrendering semi-automatic weapons and stepping away from printing presses. He saw boxes of forged bonds, piles of the children’s books that had started it all. He saw the dead book dealer’s “lawyer,” frowning at him. He saw Hagan, hands in the air.

He wanted to feel satisfied, a sense of accomplishment and victory. Instead, he kept scanning the warehouse, his gut clenching over and over.

*Where the hell was Neal?*

Suddenly, he spotted what looked a shoe sticking out from behind a desk in a glass-enclosed office. He squinted. Definitely a shoe, attached to a leg.

Peter broke into a run, pointing at the enclosure and shouting.

“Get this open,” he commanded.

When he reached the door, one of the Local PD was busting the lock open. There were bullet holes in the metal, which meant that the gunfire he had heard was probably someone trying to break in.

As soon as it was possible, he wrenched open the door and ran around the desk.

There was Neal, curled on the floor, his eyes closed.

Peter’s chest tightened.

He knelt down beside Neal and began to run his hands over the man’s chest and arms. No bullet holes, no blood, and Neal was breathing.

Neal opened his eyes. His face relaxed into a brilliant smile. “Peter,” he said. “You came.”

Peter let out a breath, pulled Neal’s head into his lap, and smoothed his hair back from his face.
“Yeah. I did. And now I’m going to kill you.”

Neal’s eyes widened a moment. “Did you get him?”

Peter nodded. “We got him. And now I’m going to kill you.”

Neal laughed, and it turned into a cough. “Okay. But first, I know it's Elizabeth's birthday, but I have a present for you too. Look behind you.”

Peter glanced over his shoulder, and his eye landed on the wide-open safe, and what looked like the real Spanish Victory Bond laying in plain view. He grinned.

“I’m still going to kill you, you brilliant son of a—“

Peter stopped talking as Neal’s entire body tensed. His hands came up to scrabble at his neck, and he let out a long, heart-wrenching moan. Peter clutched at Neal, saying his name repeatedly. It seemed to go on forever. Neal suddenly let out a light sigh and then went limp.

“How the hell? Peter’s stomach rolled as he realized the collar was still going off. He pulled out his phone and went to the app. He had shut it off. The app indicated that it was off. It must have been taking a while for the command to reach the collar for some reason, or it was malfunctioning.

“Damn it,” Peter muttered. He didn’t even have the collar key on him, it was locked in his safe at home. He squeezed his eyes shut, knowing how royally he had fucked up. He should have known. He should have brought the key.

He thought frantically. Who had keys? The Justice Facility. U.S. Marshalls, who were nowhere nearby. He could call Elizabeth, have her bring his, but that would take precious time that Neal might not have.

Peter suddenly remembered something. Emergency medical. They wouldn't have keys, but they'd probably be able to crack it off.

“I need EMTs over here,” Peter called urgently.

Fifteen minutes later, Hagan and his men were loaded in the back of police vans, Peter’s team was swarming all over the warehouse cataloguing evidence, and Peter walked out the door. He gave a few last-minute instructions, and then climbed into the back of the waiting ambulance.

An EMT was hovering over Neal, who was still unconscious, monitoring his vitals on the machine by his head. The GPS collar was laying in pieces next to Neal on the gurney, having been cut off by the team. It had stopped sending shocks once it was off.

“Hey. He’s going to be fine,” said the EMT, shooting Peter a look of compassion. “These shocks are designed to incapacitate, but it’s rare that there’s any real damage.”

Peter stared at the ring of frightening red burns around Neal’s neck. He squeezed his eyes shut, feeling the guilt wash over him. When he opened them, he noticed that Neal's wrist was handcuffed to the gurney.

"Is that really necessary?" asked Peter. "It's not like he's going anywhere."

"Regulations,” said the EMT. "Sorry. It's not hurting him, though, I promise."
“Fine,” said Peter, settling into the seat beside the EMT. He took comfort in the fact that, if Neal were awake, he could probably slip the cuff in seconds.

Someone shut the rear doors and thumped on the wall of the vehicle. The driver shifted into gear and they rumbled forward

Peter reached out and took Neal’s hand in his own. “Hang in there, kid,” he said. “I am so sorry.”
Chapter 25: Chances

Wednesday, June 30, 9:30AM

The first thing that filtered into Neal’s consciousness was pain. He had a raging headache, and there was a burning sensation around his neck. He reached up to feel what was going on there, and that’s when the second thing hit him.

He couldn’t move his arms.

Well, he could move them, but only a few inches before a sharp metal edge bit into his wrist.

Neal squeezed his eyes shut tighter. He wiggled his feet experimentally, and sure enough, they were restrained as well. He swallowed and stilled, knowing without a doubt that as soon as Friedrich realized he was awake, the games would begin.

Fuck the fact that knowing he was tied down made his cock stir with interest. And fuck Friedrich for conditioning his body in that way.

He willed himself calm. He had to be still, had to get control of his body, or else Friedrich would notice.

He felt a hand on his left shoulder, warm through his clothing.

Wait, he was wearing clothing? What was the game, here?

The hand slowly stroked down his arm and back up to his shoulder, a gentle caress that was decidedly unlike anything that bastard would do. In fact, it felt kind of…
“Neal?” said a soft voice near his left ear.

That was…wrong. That wasn’t Friedrich’s voice. That was…Peter.

Neal’s eyes flew open as it all rushed back at once. The Justice Facility, Peter’s rescue, the Hagan case, the warehouse, Peter.

Sure enough, there was the man himself, looking down at him with big dark eyes filled with concern.

“Hey,” said Peter. “Are you really awake this time?”

Neal opened his mouth to speak, and coughed instead. He kept coughing until Peter slid a hand under his back, pushed him halfway upright, and helped him sip some water. When the coughing subsided, Peter eased him back down, sliding his hand around to Neal’s chest, where it lay.

“Better?” asked Peter.


“You’ve asked me that every time you’ve woken up,” said Peter with a slightly pained smile.

“I’m sorry, I don’t...remember,” said Neal.

Peter reached out his other hand and smoothed Neal’s hair back from his forehead. “Don’t worry about it. We got him. He and all his friends are locked up and being interrogated by the F.B.I.’s finest. Well, second-finest, since I’m here with you instead.”

Neal smiled, back and closed his eyes. “Good,” he said. He felt tension that he hadn’t even known was there evaporate from his shoulders and neck. He took a deep breath, let it out slowly.

“You say that every time, too. Going back to sleep again?”

“No,” said Neal. “I don’t think so.” Even though it was difficult, he opened his eyes again, glancing around the room. “Hospital. What’s going on?”

Peter frowned. “The GPS collar was giving you shocks even after I had shut it down, and it got pretty bad. The EMTs had to break it off of you to get it to stop.”

Neal twisted his head from side to side, cringing at the pain it caused, but noting that the collar was absent from his neck.

“That explains the new accessories, then,” he said, rattling the cuffs.

“Yeah, sorry about that,” said Peter. “They’ve had you locked down since the GPS collar came off. There’s not going to be any way I can convince them to remove the restraints. Even though I’m pretty sure you could be out of them in two minutes if you wanted to be.”

Neal grinned. “Really? You think it would take me two whole minutes? I thought you had more faith in me than that, Peter.”

Peter rolled his eyes. “Anyway, you’re in here overnight, at least. They want to monitor your heart to make sure there’s no damage from the shocks. How’s it feeling in there?”

As he spoke, Peter rubbed Neal’s chest just over his heart, and the sensation made his heart beat a little faster. The heart rate monitor on Neal’s right began to beep, and Neal tried desperately not to
blush. If Peter noticed, he didn’t say anything.

“It feels okay,” said Neal honestly. His head was killing him, but his chest felt fine. Better than fine, if Peter kept his hand there, brushing lightly back and forth. It was equal parts comforting and…something else. He took a slow breath, reminding himself that now was not the time to let go of his control.

“You’ve got some pretty serious shock burns on your neck,” Peter said, grimacing, “but they don’t need to do a skin graft or anything. It’s just going to take some time to heal. No collar until then, which means restraints.”

Neal watched as Peter ran a hand over the cuff on his left wrist, barely brushing Neal’s skin as he did so. Peter looked…worried.

“Hey,” said Neal. “It’s fine. I’ve had worse, and I understand. After all, I did leave my boundaries without permission.”

“A bout that,” said Peter, fastening a sharp gaze on Neal. “Listen closely, my infuriating, brilliant, exasperating, clever, impulsive friend—”

Neal’s heart stuttered again. “I’m your friend?” he asked, lips stretching wide in a sudden grin.

Peter raised an eyebrow. “That’s what you got from that sentence?”

A nurse bustled into the room and headed straight for Neal’s right side. “Morning,” she said. “You seem to be with us this time, that’s good.”

“Morning,” said Neal. He watched as she fussed with the machine a moment.

“I’m Carla,” she said. “I’ll be your nurse today. How are you feeling?”

Neal considered this. “My neck burns,” he said, “and I have a headache.”

She peered at his eyes, then pulled out a wand and ran it over his forehead. It beeped.

“Temp is normal,” she said. “Readings look okay. A little spike in heart rate here, but that’s normal as you’re waking up and acclimating.”

“Carla,” said Neal, in an attempt to distract her from prattling on about his “spike” in heart rate, “have you met my friend Peter? Peter thinks I’m brilliant and clever.”

Carla looked at Peter, and then at Neal. “Always good to have a friend who thinks you’re brilliant and clever.” She picked up a small button attached to a wire that led to one of the hanging liquid bags next to the bed, and placed it in his right hand. “This is your morphine drip. It goes right into you, there.” She tapped a finger over the taped up needle that was inserted into the back of his right hand. “If you’re feeling pain, you can hit the button. It’s set at the right dosage, so you can’t overdose on it; it won’t let you. If it’s not helping, or you want something else, hit this other button, the green one, and I’ll come see what you need.”

Neal nodded. “Thanks,” he said. He hit the morphine button experimentally.

“Good, you can follow instructions,” she said.

Peter snorted. “Don’t count on it,” he muttered.

“I follow instructions,” said Neal.
“When you feel like it,” amended Peter.

“No, when the instructions are clear and have a valid purpose, and are not overridden by a more important consideration,” said Neal.

They stared at each other for a beat. Then Peter said, “And that is exactly the problem. You think you’re too smart to just listen to others when they tell you something. Which is how you land yourself chained to a hospital bed needing a morphine drip.”

Neal narrowed his eyes. He turned back to the nurse, who was making a final adjustment on the machine. “Carla, what my friend Peter is failing to understand is that all this,” he waved his hand slightly, indicating himself, “was a risk I was willing to take because the reward was so great.”

“Sounds good,” Carla said, as she made a notation on the chart at the foot of the bed. “Call me if you need anything.” She hustled back out the door without another glance.

Neal turned to look at Peter. There was a little wrinkle between Peter’s eyebrows. Neal wished his hands were free so he could reach up and smooth it out.

“Catching Hagan was so important to you that you were willing to risk everything, including your life?” Peter leaned in, his voice urgent. “Because that’s what you did. You risked your life. You could have been shot. By Hagan, or by the law enforcement coming after you. The collar could have caused permanent damage. And now you’ve actually made an escape attempt, which means Friedrich might be able to revoke your release and it jeopardizes the chances that the Court will think your ‘value’ will be able to be utilized. After all, what good will you be to society if you run from me?”

Neal swallowed and tried to ignore the pounding in his head. He knew. He really knew what he had been risking. That was what he needed Peter to understand. This wasn’t an impulsive decision based on a need for adrenaline or proving his independence. It was a calculated risk. He licked his lips and decided to try to explain.

“I didn’t just do this without thinking about it,” he said, staring at the blankets where they draped over his bare feet. “I thought about it a lot. I saw the opportunity to take down Hagan, and I swear I thought about all of the possible ways it could play out, and considered all of that carefully before I decided it was worth the risk.”

“You thought about it a lot?” Peter’s voice was incredulous. “You must have read the bit about exigent circumstances after dinner last night, while Elizabeth and I were watching television. How long could you possibly have thought about it?”

“All night,” snapped Neal. He raised his gaze to Peter. “I didn’t sleep last night, I just kept going over everything. Also…I think fast.”

Peter pursed his lips, but Neal thought he might have seen a spark of amusement in Peter’s eyes. He took that as encouragement to continue.

“I think you think that I was risking my life to catch Hagan. And maybe I was, but it was more than that, Peter. It wasn’t just about Hagan, it was about getting a huge win on a big case that no one could solve before I showed up, and doing it in a big, flashy way that was – as you have already noted – brilliant and clever. Come on, it was. You have to admit that, at least. Getting you to chase me? Timing it all so that I could manage to stay safe long enough for you to come after me? It was an almost perfect con.”
Peter sighed. “It was brilliant. But it was also too risky. Neal, I’m not exaggerating when I said you could have been killed. You bet your life that you’d be able to execute this plan, and a lot was left up to chance. Too much. Your life is too valuable to take chances on like that. I can’t…I am doing every fucking thing I can think of to keep you alive, kiddo, and you keep…” He ran a hand through his hair and looked away.

My life is too valuable? Jesus, thought Neal, wondering at how Peter kept saying things that set him back on his heels and made his heart thump in his chest. Did he even realize he was doing it? Neal moved to grab Peter’s hand, and was brought up short by the handcuff. So instead, he tapped on the bedrail to get Peter to look back at him. When he spoke, he tried to put as much assurance and conviction as he could muster behind his voice, even though it was still a little rusty.

“Look. I would say I’m sorry for taking the risk, but I’m not. This was a huge win. Huge. If you want, roll me into the courtroom and I’ll tell them that I never intended to run; it was all about coming up with a way to nail Hagan. Because that’s my job, or it will be, after you buy my Contract. You risk your life in your job all the time, you can’t tell me you don’t.” He paused, and took a breath. “Besides…you’re wrong about one thing. When I was deciding whether to go for it, I wasn’t leaving that much up to chance. You guessing what I was doing, and getting there in time? That wasn’t chance. I knew that was something I could count on. You know me, you know how my mind works, and I was betting my life on that. It felt like a safe bet to me.”

Peter’s mouth had slowly dropped open during the latter half of Neal’s speech, and he was looking at Neal like…well, like Neal had just cured cancer or something. Finally, he closed his mouth and shook his head, his eyes going soft and his mouth turning up at the corners. He looked like he was trying to decide what to say in response, when his phone buzzed.

Peter pulled the phone out of his pocket and glanced at the screen. “We’re not done talking about this,” he said, before answering the call. “This is Burke.” There was a long pause, and Peter closed his eyes briefly. “Right. An hour? I’ll be there.”

“What’s in an hour?” asked Neal, as Peter ended the call and tapped on the phone, starting another.

“Hi, hon,” said Peter. “Yeah, he’s awake. I have to leave in a bit. If you wanted to swing by, now would be a great time.” A pause. “Really? I don’t know how you read minds the way you do.”

Another pause. “I’ll ask him. Neal, you hungry? The doc said you could eat if you were.”

As if it could hear the question, Neal’s stomach immediately growled.

“His stomach says definitely yes,” said Peter into the phone. “Great, I’ll see you in a few. We’re in Room 317.”

“Elizabeth?” asked Neal, once the phone was tucked back into Peter’s pocket. Peter nodded.

“She’s on her way as we speak, and is bringing outside food.”

“She’s a goddess,” said Neal with a sigh. He was touched that Elizabeth would even consider the fact that he might prefer something other than hospital fare. His stomach growled again.

“Indeed she is,” said Peter. “So…that first call was Margaret Beechwood.”

Neal’s stomach, which had been gurgling in anticipation of Elizabeth Burke-approved brunch, flipped over. “Oh,” said Neal.

“Yeah, oh. Friedrich has wasted no time in running into Court with an emergency motion demanding the conditional release be revoked.” Neal figured his face must have looked pretty
grim, because Peter leaned in, placed a hand on his chest again. “It’s going to be okay. I had alerted Margaret to this morning’s events as soon as we arrived at the hospital, and she got a friend of hers in the clerk’s office to alert her as soon as Friedrich’s attorneys showed up. She managed to stall the hearing on the emergency motion by telling the Court that we could be there in an hour prepared to conduct the two-party hearing immediately.”

“Okay,” said Neal. “What do you think…what are my chances?”

Peter shrugged. “I honestly don’t know, Neal. Margaret and I talked about it very briefly. She suggested that maybe you weren’t running because you and I had planned this—“

“No.” Neal’s left hand shot up to the limit of the restraints, and he managed to reach Peter’s forearm, fingers digging into the tanned flesh. “If we planned it, then the exigent circumstances exception won’t apply, and Hagan will walk. That’s the whole reason I couldn’t tell you. We can’t—you have to tell them you didn’t know and I did this on my own, or it’s all—“

“Shhhhh.” Peter’s other hand came around to settle on the top of Neal’s head, and suddenly Neal was very focused on those two points of warmth. They steadied him, and he felt himself calming. “I know, Neal. I’m not going to tank the Hagan collar. I think I have an idea of how to play it. I’ve been thinking it through all morning. But it’s a wild card.”

Neal took a breath. This was the risk, and he had known that. He had started it. Now, he just had to rely on Peter to – once again – take it the rest of the way. Peter could do it.

“Here’s what I’m worried about,” said Peter. He waited for Neal’s eyes to find his, and then said, “I’m worried that you’ll panic, slip these cuffs, and take this chance to disappear for real.”

Neal’s eyes widened, and he shook his head slightly. “Not going to happen. I could, I mean, assuming that I could stand and move enough to do it, which is not a sure thing at the moment. But I won’t. Unless you’re…” he paused, dropped his voice to a whisper, “…are you telling me to take the opportunity to run?”

Was Peter telling him that now was the moment? He was relatively free and unencumbered. He could call Mozzie, get a hand, and slip out of the hospital before anyone knew he was gone. Rather than feeling excited at the prospect, Neal felt cold and…alone.

“No,” said Peter. The hand on Neal’s head squeezed slightly, which actually made his headache recede for a second. “God, no. I am not telling you anything of the kind. This is not a wink-wink moment. I don’t want you to…please don’t run. Give me a chance to fix this.”

Neal relaxed. “I always intended to,” he said. “The whole point of this exercise was to give us the ammo for the arbitration, anyway. I wasn’t trying to get away.”

Peter searched his face. “I’m going to trust you,” he said. “Though I’m not sure I have much choice.”

Just then, the door opened, and Elizabeth breezed in, carrying one of Peter’s favorite suits and several paper bags and beaming at Neal. She hung the suit on the back of the door, and then went straight to Neal’s bedside.

“Reinforcements are here,” she sang. She leaned in and dropped a kiss on Neal’s cheek. “Honey, you gave us a real scare this morning. How are you feeling?”

Neal grinned stupidly at Elizabeth. He wasn’t sure he’d ever been happier to see anyone, other than when Peter had shown up at the Justice Facility…and the warehouse…and by his hospital bed. He
took a long sniff.

“Do I smell *truffle oil*?” he asked.

“You’ll see,” she said. “All the other patients are going to be so jealous of you.”

Peter gave Neal’s hair a last ruffle, and his chest one last pat, then stood. “I leave you in very competent hands,” he said.

“Thanks, Peter,” said Neal. “Good luck. Only, this time, can you—“

“Yeah, yeah. I’ll call as soon as it’s over. Your phones are in the drawer of that side table, by the way,” said Peter.

He circled the bed and gave Elizabeth a kiss. “Hi and bye,” he said. “Thanks for bringing the suit.”


Peter gave a salute, and then grabbed his suit on the way out. Neal looked after him a moment, a little lost in his thoughts, until he heard a soft sigh. He turned to Elizabeth. She was looking at him wistfully, her expression soft and thoughtful.

“Everything okay?” he asked.

She nodded. “I think so,” she said. “I definitely think so. Now, I have a very important question for you: do you want your eggs benedict before, after, or with your bacon?”

He laughed. Even though his neck and head hurt, he was chained to a hospital bed, and he might get shoved back into a cell by nightfall…what he had done was definitely worth the risk.


* Wednesday, June 30, 10:48AM *

Peter zipped up his fly as he turned away from the urinal, and then crossed to the sinks to wash his hands. In his head, he ran over the things he intended to say to the judge. He had spoken with Margaret on the phone on the way over, and explained his theory. She was on board.

Unfortunately, the judge who had ordered and then affirmed the order of conditional release was out. That meant that Neal’s case was going before a different judge. Margaret had been trying to track down who it was, but Peter knew that this might cause additional problems.

He bent down and splashed a little water on his face, careful not to let it drip on his suit. All he could do, he reasoned, was his best. They’d deal with the consequences however they fell.

As Peter straightened up and patted his face dry with a paper towel, the door to the men’s room opened. Peter flicked a glance in the mirror, and froze.

Carl Friedrich spotted Peter at the same moment and grinned. Once again, the grin was more of a leer, all teeth and cruel eyes, amusement rather than gladness.

“Agent Burke,” said Friedrich, stepping smoothly toward the sink. “How are you?”

Peter tossed the paper towel in the garbage and turned to face the man he had come to hate more than anything else in the world.
“I’m doing well,” said Peter. “I had a big break in a case this morning, so I can’t really complain.”

“Yes, I heard about that,” said Friedrich. “Congratulations.”

“You heard about it awfully fast. How is that, I wonder?” It was true. He had expected Friedrich to seek to revoke the conditional release, but both he and Margaret had been surprised at the speed with which it happened. Friedrich had to have had his attorneys drafting the emergency motion not long after Neal’s collar crossed the boundary. It’s possible they were actively monitoring the GPS feed, though how they were allowed that was a mystery. Margaret had promised to look into it after they got past this speed bump.

Friedrich tipped his head to the side. “Did I? Word travels quickly, I suppose. So, tell me. How is my boy doing? Not too worse for the wear, I hope? Those collars can do a number.”

Peter’s pulse sped up at hearing Friedrich refer to Neal as “his boy.” He clenched his jaw and curled his right hand into a fist.

“If you mean Neal, he’s fine,” said Peter. “He’ll recover. He did well this morning, was singlehandedly responsible for a major collar. He’s going to be a great asset to the Bureau.”

“Perhaps,” said Friedrich. “If the Court decides he will safely remain in custody for long enough to be an asset. Seems unlikely, since he likes to try to escape.”

Peter counted backwards from ten. In a few minutes, he would be in the courtroom. He could argue with Friedrich then. It would do no good to do so here, in the men’s room. After a moment, he shrugged.

“I guess that’s for the Court to decide,” he said. “But I have a good feeling about it.”

Peter brushed past Friedrich, headed for the door. Before he could reach it, Friedrich spoke again.

“You know, Agent Burke, it seems like Neal is an awful lot of trouble. You’re getting dragged into Court over and over, missing days in the office, having to take care of someone twenty-four-seven. It can be exhausting. And this is just the beginning. If you buy his Contract, you’ll have years of monitoring his every move, never knowing if he’s going to use that ‘brilliant’ mind you say he has to find a way to escape or, worse, start committing crimes again. Right under your nose.”

Peter turned back to the man. “Make your point, Friedrich.”

Friedrich placed his palms up, a gesture of innocence. “I’m just noting that you’ve done enough for the boy already. No one would blame you if you decided it wasn’t worth all the effort to continue. Let the system work the way it’s supposed to, and we can go our merry ways. I can get back to my work and my family, and you can get back to your wife.”

Narrowing his eyes Peter said, “Leave my wife out of this.”

“Maybe you should be thinking about her.” Friedrich took a step toward Peter, his eyes glittering. “Here you are, taking money from the equity of your house, depleting your savings, all to what? Spend no time with her? Risk her safety by housing a criminal? Give her a nice birthday present. Just walk away.”

Peter pushed aside alarm at how much Friedrich seemed to know about his personal affairs, and simply said, “Friedrich, if you know what’s good for you, you’ll stop right the hell there.”

Friedrich took another step, crowding into Peter’s space. Peter stood his ground.
“I think it would be wise, Agent Burke. I’m a very important man. I influence a lot of people, people who could easily make sure that you suddenly have no job, no safety net to fall back on. What would happen to that beautiful wife of yours if you’re forced to sell your Brooklyn brownstone and move into a small apartment in a cheap area? You never know what dangers could lurk in dark alleyways.”

Peter pushed his jacket aside and placed his hands on his hips, legs spread wide. It was his F.B.I. Agent pose. Elizabeth teased him about it mercilessly, but it usually did the trick. He leaned forward, crowding Friedrich right back. When he spoke, his voice was low and dangerous.

“Mr. Friedrich, I’d like to remind you that I am a federal agent. I am also the Plaintiff in the case against you, and a witness. It is a federal offense to intimidate witnesses and to threaten a federal agent.”

Friedrich took a step back, straightening his jacket. “I don’t think anyone is making threats here, Agent Burke. And if you’re intimidated by my extreme power and reach, well…that’s really not my fault.” He smoothed his lapels. “We should probably get to the courtroom. Wouldn’t want to be late.”

He brushed by Peter and strode out. Peter watched the door swing shut, and then released a sound that was suspiciously close to a growl.

With a quick stretch of his neck from side to side, Peter composed himself. He had an argument to make, and he was going to hand Friedrich his ass. The man was going to severely regret having threatened either Neal or Elizabeth.

He’d be willing to bet on it.

* WC – WC – WC – WC – WC – WC – WC *

Wednesday, June 30, 10:48AM

Neal turned his head to the side. “Elizabeth, please. No more. I am stuffed.”

She laughed, the forkful of brownie poised in the air. “Are you sure? It’s chocolaty and delightful.”

“I’m sure.” He sighed. “It was great. Thank you. I hadn’t realized I was so hungry, but I guess I haven’t been eating as much as I should have the past couple of days.”

Elizabeth rerouted the brownie bite to her own mouth, and sighed in pleasure.

“No, you haven’t,” she said. “And you’re so skinny. Tell you what: give me a list of your absolutely favorite foods, the things you’ve been craving, and I’ll make them all. You won’t be able to resist.”

She began to pack up the remains of their brunch, which had really been fit for kings. More than a few, with the amount of food that had come out of those bags.

Neal had been shell-shocked at container after container. Eggs benedict with truffle oil, somehow still warm and perfect, bacon, sausage, waffles, finger sandwiches, three-pepper salad, quiche, and the sinful brownies.

After a little bit of embarrassed awkwardness, Neal had adjusted to having Elizabeth feed him. There was no other way he was going to eat. He had thought about slipping a cuff temporarily, but decided against it. If someone came in and caught him, he would have ended up in even more
restraints.

So she had fed him, and wiped his mouth, and it had been…okay. Nice, even, to be taken care of that closely.

“I wonder if I should offer some of our leftovers to the nursing staff, make you some friends,” said Elizabeth. He grinned at her. She definitely had a conman’s instinct. If he tried, he bet he could make her into a decent grifter. Better even than Kate, maybe.

“Leftovers of what?” asked a new voice.

“Moz?” Neal gaped at the short man standing in the doorway. “I mean…” he glanced at Elizabeth, “Haversham. What are you doing here?”

Mozzie detested hospitals. He hated sick people, and was a hypochondriac of the worst kind. Moreover, hospitals were part of “the system,” and Mozzie avoided “the system” at all costs.

Not to mention…how had Mozzie even known to find him here?

“I’m visiting my sick friend,” said Mozzie, as if this were the most natural thing in the world. “Hello, Mrs. Suit. Nice to see you again.”

“Hi, Mr. Haversham,” said Elizabeth. “Leftovers from the brunch I brought Neal. There are still some waffles, and a couple of pieces of bacon, some sandwiches…and a half a brownie. If you want anything.”

Mozzie smiled and gave a little bow. “You are too generous, Mrs. Suit.” He hesitated. “You can call me Mozzie. Mr. Haversham is a mouthful.”

“I thought your first name was Dante,” said Elizabeth, her eyes twinkling.

“Oh, it is. Mozzie is a childhood nickname that stuck. So, Neal, you dead yet?”

Neal rolled his eyes. “Clearly not. How did you know I was here?”

Mozzie began to poke in the containers of food. He pulled out a mini-quiche. “Any cheese in this?” he asked. Elizabeth shook her head, and Mozzie took a giant bite. “The Suit called me,” he said around his mouthful of egg.

“Peter called you?” Neal’s brows wrinkled. “How?”

“He used your phone. Obviously. How else was he going to track me down? Speaking of which…” Mozzie reached into his messenger bag and pulled out a new burner phone. “Destroy the old one, it’s been compromised. Use this one from now on.” He turned to Elizabeth. “You saw nothing.”

She stifled a laugh. “I don’t know what you mean. There was nothing to see.”

Neal was still processing. Peter had called Mozzie?

“Moz, what did Peter say to you when he called?”

Mozzie began polishing off the rest of the bacon. “He said that you had been injured, and were going to be fine, but you were at the hospital at least until tomorrow, and asked if I would mind stopping by to keep you company. I of course demanded to know exactly what happened, but his explanations were less than satisfactory.”
Peter had called Mozzie. Had thought to take Neal’s phone, look up Mozzie’s contact info, and called him. To come and sit with Neal at the hospital.

Neal recalled the conversation he had had with Peter just two days earlier. Yes, Peter. I have actual friends, of which he is one. Peter had wanted Neal to have a friend there.

Peter had called in Elizabeth. Elizabeth had come.

It was almost more than he could take.

He tuned back into the conversation. Elizabeth was explaining to Mozzie, in broad strokes, what had happened, and Mozzie was glaring at Neal.

“What?” Neal asked.

“If you have to ask why I’m furious with you right now, you’re not as smart as you pretend to be. Either that, or that shock collar scrambled your brains.” Mozzie stepped forward, his expression shifting. “Wait. Did that collar scramble your brains?”

“No. I’m fine,” said Neal. “And for everyone’s information, I made a choice that I thought would get me what I wanted, I’m not sorry, and I’d like to talk about something else.”

Mozzie looked like he might be about to argue, but Elizabeth stepped in.

“Neal, did Peter ever tell you how we met?” she asked.

Neal and Mozzie both swiveled to look at her. “I don’t think so,” he said, confused.

She settled herself in the chair Peter had vacated. "Mozzie, why don’t you have a seat. You’re going to love this. I was working as an assistant gallery manager when we had a theft – hey, that wasn’t you guys, was it?”

“When was it?” asked Neal. Mozzie shot him a look.

“April of ’97,” said Elizabeth.

“Not us,” said Neal. “Well, not me. I was still in high school. And Mozzie didn’t do art until I was involved. Not really.”

“Neal, get off the drugs or let me tape your mouth closed.” Mozzie sounded panicked.

Neal grinned. It wasn’t the drugs. Well, maybe it was partly the drugs. He was feeling pretty relaxed.

“So anyway,” said Elizabeth, “who do you think the F.B.I. assigned to the case? This wet-behind-the-ears, slightly awkward young agent. When it became clear he was interested in me but too nervous to do anything about it, I decided to take a chance…”

* WC – WC – WC – WC – WC – WC – WC *

Wednesday, June 30, 11:26AM

It was all Peter could do to sit still in his seat at the counsel table. For the past twenty minutes, Freidrich’s attorneys had been making their argument to revoke the conditional release. Every time they made a statement that deliberately mischaracterized a fact or event, Peter tensed. He knew Margaret would get her opportunity to straighten it out once it was their turn, but it was hard to
listen to nonetheless.

The judge – a Judge Markham, whom Margaret had assured Peter was a fair judge with no apparent preference for or against ESIA – listened throughout the argument. Unlike Judge Lawrence, he asked no questions. It was hard to tell what he was thinking.

Finally, Friedrich’s attorney finished his argument. This time it was the other one, Suit Number 2, who was taking the lead. Perhaps after the last hearing, Friedrich had demanded a change.

The argument had been predictable: Neal had run on the collar, and since this was technically the second time this had happened, he was a flight risk and, considering he was a danger to the public, his release should be revoked. In addition, his propensity to attempt escape demonstrated his lack of remorse for his crimes and his inability to reform, and limited his potential usefulness to society.

The judge turned his gaze to Margaret, who stood and began to counter. Peter admired her poise and the way she could speak in a way that made everything seem so logical and obvious. She corrected a variety of misconceptions as she went, including the fact that there was no evidence that Neal had killed the other inmate and that the first “escape” had been nothing of the sort.

When it came time for her to explain what had happened that morning, as they had agreed, she said, “Your Honor, as you know, with our willingness to appear immediately and waive the ten-day period before the two-party hearing, we will be submitting our written response after we are done here today. That response will include an affidavit from Agent Peter Burke, who is attempting to purchase Mr. Caffrey’s Contract and will be his Owner. Agent Burke’s testimony will include a description of exactly what occurred this morning. If you’ll allow it, I would like Agent Burke to be the one to make this portion of the argument.”

The judge nodded, and shifted in his seat. His face was still unreadable, but he said, “I’ll hear from Agent Burke.”

Peter stood, buttoning his suit jacket, and cleared his throat. “Thank you, Your Honor. My understanding of the value Mr. Caffrey could be to the F.B.I. began the day I visited him at the Justice Facility, where he was awaiting execution. My testimony on the state of his cell and the conditions he was subjected to are in our prior filings, so I won’t recount them today. While I was there, he noticed a fiber on my suit jacket – this suit jacket, actually. It had come from a case I had been working on, and must have gotten under the collar of my jacket when a safe we were cracking exploded. My team had been unable to identify the fibers that we found, but Mr. Caffrey immediately knew what it was. He was right about it, and it was incredibly specialized knowledge.

“When Mr. Caffrey was released into my custody, in addition to helping him recover, I asked him to dig into the case files and see what he could come up with. Once again, he was immediately able to move the case forward, using his specialized knowledge, skills, and sharp mind. We had been chasing this criminal for years, without being able to figure out his true identity. In less forty-eight hours, Mr. Caffrey had done just that.”

Peter cleared his throat again. “One thing you need to understand about Neal Caffrey is that he thinks he is smarter than everyone else. And, for the most part, that’s true. His mind works through puzzles very quickly, and he can usually find solutions invisible to everyone else because he is a creative thinker. He also has a high tolerance for risk, and will often take actions that many would be afraid to take, because he sees the reward as great enough to be worth it.

“When we identified the probable location at which our target was printing forged bearer bonds – bonds that would worth roughly one-hundred-and-fifty million dollars – but couldn’t get a warrant to search the warehouse, we ran up against a brick wall. Now, I’m used to this. We in the law
enforcement business know that sometimes this happens, and there isn’t anything we can do except keep our heads down and find another way, wait for another chance. Neal, however, was feeling incredible pressure.

“Imagine your life is hanging in the balance, every inaction could mean failure, and every failure could mean death. That was what Neal was experiencing. He knew that he had to prove he was valuable in order to be allowed to continue to live. Now, I know he’s valuable, regardless of whether or not we caught Curtis Hagan this time around or not, and perhaps the Court would see it that way, too. But Neal panicked. He decided to take an extreme action, that put his own life at great personal immediate danger, in order to make sure Hagan was caught and he could demonstrate his value. So that he would be allowed to stay with me and work for the F.B.I.”

This was the realization Peter had come to that morning, on his way to the courthouse. He knew Neal tended to panic. Often that meant he ran away. This time…this time he had moved forward, raising the stakes, on the chance that he could succeed. He had stuck around.

There was a glass of water in front of him, and he took a sip before continuing.

“Your Honor, Mr. Caffrey wasn’t trying to escape. He ran directly into the fire, so that I would chase him, find him, and take our criminal down in the process. He’s not a danger to society, he’s an incredibly brave asset. Let me explain exactly what went down…”

At the end of the hearing, the judge sat quietly for several minutes. Everyone waited for him to speak. Peter couldn’t help sneak a glance at Friedrich, and was glad to see he was turning redder and redder with each passing moment.

“I find that Mr. Caffrey’s motives, though unorthodox, were pure. Mr. Caffrey could perhaps benefit from some education and training into what types of actions would be appropriate for an F.B.I. asset, but I trust Agent Burke can handle that. However—“

Peter’s blood turned cold.

“—even though I find that Mr. Caffrey was not attempting an actual escape, he has demonstrated that he is capable of such behavior and intelligent enough to be able to plan an escape. In order to ensure that Mr. Caffrey stays put until after the arbitration, I think some additional protections are in order.”

Peter looked over at Margaret. She frowned, but shook her head slightly, telling him to wait and see what the judge was going to say.

“I understand that Agent Burke is strongly opposed to Mr. Caffrey remaining in state custody while awaiting arbitration, and I think a compromise is in order. Mr. Caffrey may remain with Agent Burke. In addition to the GPS collar, Mr. Caffrey will be monitored in person at all times. He will be leashed in public, not be left alone, and must be restrained to sleep. Because of the indications that Mr. Caffrey is able to extricate himself from many standard restraints, I will lay out a required minimum that Agent Burke will follow. Agent Burke, if you cannot comply with this, I am happy to order Mr. Caffrey to be picked up and remanded to the Justice Facility.”

Peter swallowed. He hated this, and Neal would hate it too, but it was better than Neal going back to the Justice Facility. He just hoped Neal would see it that way. He nodded, and the judge seemed satisfied.

“In that case, I will issue my revised order within the hour.”
The judge stood, and everyone stood with him. As soon as he exited the courtroom, Peter turned to Margaret. “I’ve got to get back to the hospital,” he said. “I promised Neal. I’ll… I’ll break the news to him.”

“Go,” she said. “I’ll wait for the order and call you.”

He hurried out of the courtroom. Once he was in the hallway, he pulled out his phone to make the call to Neal. Before he could, the phone buzzed with an incoming call.

“This is Burke,” Peter said.

“Boss, I’ve got some news,” said Diana. She was speaking in a low voice, her tone urgent.

“About Hagan?” he asked. He began to move towards the exit. He wanted to get back to the hospital as soon as possible.

“No, about Friedrich.”

Peter stopped dead. “What about him?” he asked. The man was behind him, maybe still in the courtroom, maybe out in the hall. He needed to keep moving.

“We finally made some headway with that car that nearly hit Neal on Saturday,” she said. “I had them pull some additional camera footage to try to track the car from the intersection, and we finally got a good facial shot when he ran a red light a few blocks away.”

*Jackpot,* thought Peter. Those traffic cameras were the best thing to happen to law enforcement in years.

“And?” he asked.

“And we got a hit. The guy’s name is Antoine Vega. His BOP is full of petties beginning at his eighteenth birthday and continuing until about seven years ago. Mostly small-time, but his last brush was an armed robbery, and he got five years.”

Peter exited the courthouse and turned left, headed for his car. “Where did they send him?” he asked.

“Winters Correctional Camp,” said Diana.

“Where Neal was,” said Peter. “I wonder if they knew each other.”

“I’d guess the answer is yes,” said Diana. “Vega and Caffrey were cellmates for seven months.”

“Good work, Diana,” said Peter. His car was in sight, and he picked up the pace. “Anything else? Any link to Friedrich?”

“Not yet,” she said, “but…”

“But it seems like a hell of a coincidence. All right, let me know if you shake anything else loose.”

He hung up and yanked open the car door. He’d call Elizabeth on the way about the hearing. For now, he was anxious to make sure Neal was still where he had left him.

* WC – WC – WC – WC – WC – WC – WC *

*Wednesday, June 30, 4:20PM*
Neal heard voices murmuring. Something about a detail.

*What detail?* he wondered. He had always had an eye for details, which is what made him such a successful forger. So many people missed the little things, and it was those little things that persuaded even the most careful eye.

Now someone was talking about…a cot. Which made absolutely no sense, especially since the very next thing that Neal heard was the word “reservation.”

He squeezed his eyes shut. He just wanted to sleep a little more. He moved his hands to drag a pillow over his head, and they only moved a few inches.

*Right. The cuffs. The hospital. The hearing.*

Neal opened his eyes to the mid-afternoon light filtering through the window to his left. He blinked a few times, clearing away the blurriness from sleep.

Peter was pacing in front of the window, his phone to his ear, speaking in low tones. No doubt trying not to wake Neal.

Neal waited while Peter finished his call, in which he was apparently rescheduling something for the weekend. Peter glanced over his shoulder, and caught Neal’s eye. He smiled.

“Hey there,” he said. He moved to the chair beside the bed and sat. Like it was drawn by a magnet, his hand found its way back onto Neal’s chest. “How are you feeling?”

Neal thought about it for a second. His neck still stung, and he still had a headache. Was it better than it had been before, or was he just more used to it? Otherwise, he felt mostly the same, except that his muscles were locked up from being in the same position all day. He tried to stretch, but it was hard with his limited movement.

“My head hurts,” he said, “and my muscles are stiff. But I’m okay.”

Peter looked concerned, but also relieved. “That’s all normal,” he said. “I’m glad you’re not just saying ‘I’m fine.’”

“I figure when you’re in the hospital it’s best to be mostly honest about how you feel, unless you’re trying to get out,” said Neal.

“You’re not trying to get out?” Peter’s hand pressed down slightly, as if he needed to hold Neal in place.

“I’m not trying to get out, Peter.” He would keep saying that until Peter believed it. Maybe until he believed it himself. He had no intention of running – at the moment – but he knew there could come a time when he had to make a different choice.

“Good. You know that if you did, I’d catch you. I’m good at that.”

Neal rolled his eyes. “What time is it?”

Peter glanced at his watch. “Nearly four-thirty,” he said. “Elizabeth said to tell you to feel better, and that she’ll see you tomorrow when you get home.”

Mozzie and Elizabeth had hung around, talking and distracting Neal until his eyes had started to droop. He had apologized, but since he hadn’t gotten any sleep the night before, he couldn’t seem
to keep his eyes open. Mozzie had said his goodbyes, and he had told Elizabeth to go, but she had insisted on sticking around. She said she had a book she had been wanting to read, and had settled in to the chair while he let himself be dragged into slumber. That had been around twelve-thirty. Four hours of sleep wasn’t too shabby.

“Tell her thank you,” said Neal. Then he realized what Peter had said, and froze. The hearing.

“Wait a second – tomorrow when I get home? Does that mean I…”

Peter nodded. “Yeah, you’re stuck with me a little while longer,” said Peter with a wry smile.

Neal let out a breath. He had trusted that Peter would work it out. If he hadn’t, he wouldn’t have taken the risk. Still, it was a relief to know that he wasn’t going back to Justice.

“There is one catch,” said Peter. He looked away.

“What is it?” asked Neal. His anxiety ratcheted up again, but he tried to tell himself that anything was better than going back to Justice.

“The judge thought that while you weren’t trying to escape, you had shown that you could, and that you would be willing to take risks to do so. He offered a compromise, and I took it.” He cleared his throat, then seemed to make himself look back at Neal. “He wants you more closely monitored.”

“More closely monitored?” asked Neal. “How does that work? I’m on GPS collar—“

“Not at the moment, you’re not.”

“—and you watch me every second. You sleep in my bed and hang all over me like a sweaty sandbag—“

“Hey,” said Peter. He actually looked hurt. “I don’t sweat while I sleep.”

Neal snorted. “Sorry,” he said. “I don’t…I don’t actually mind that. But my point is…I’m pretty closely monitored already.”

“And yet, you were able to leave the house without me knowing.”

Neal sighed. “Yeah, okay. What do they want?”

“Until you can wear your collar again, restraints at all times, including at night,” said Peter. Neal made a face. “And…a leash. In public.”

Neal felt all the blood drain out of his face. “A leash?” he managed. “I don’t even…most slaves are not on leashes.”

“I know.” Peter sounded annoyed by the entire thing as well. “Listen, think about it this way. You don’t have to go back to the Justice Facility. When we’re at home – which we can be, for the most part, if you want – either El or I has to be around. We can use minimal restraints, except for at night. It would be just until after the Forced Sale, so it could be over as early as next week.”

Neal closed his eyes. At least he wasn’t going back to Justice. That was going to be his mantra for the next four years, he could already tell.

He felt Peter’s hand pressing on his chest a little harder. “I’m sorry, Neal,” said Peter.

At the sound of contrition in Peter’s voice, Neal’s eyes flew back open. “Hey,” he said. “You did
great. I’m fine with it, and I’m not just saying that.”

Peter shook his head. “Not just about the results of the hearing. I was thinking about it today. Before the hearing, and this afternoon while you were sleeping. It’s at least partly my fault you went after Hagan this morning. I made you feel like if we didn’t catch him, there was no way we were going to succeed on the Forced Sale. I shouldn’t have done that. We had a good case anyway, regardless of whether or not we got Hagan this time around.”

Neal stared at Peter. This was definitely a different path for this conversation to take than it had that morning. Peter took a breath and continued.

“When I kept saying we were in trouble, it was just…I wanted you to stay focused on Hagan and not on other things, like Kate, or your case. It’s also kind of how I am. There’s an urgency to this work, and I wanted you to understand that when you’re working for me, we aren’t going to be on regular hours. We’re going to be working hard and other things often get put on hold. But by doing all of that, I made you panic about your case and feel like you had to take this crazy risk. For that, I’m sorry.”

Neal burst out laughing. Peter’s brow wrinkled in confusion. “Peter, come on,” said Neal. “When have I ever done something I didn’t want to do? You didn’t make me go after Hagan. I wanted to do it. I wanted to bring him down. I’m choosing not to dwell on the weirdness of genuinely wanting to take down a criminal for the moment, but I wanted it. And I wanted what it could get me – to be out of danger from Friedrich. That wasn’t your fault.”

Peter patted Neal’s chest. “I was giving you an out, you know,” said Peter. “The smart thing to do would have been to say ‘yes, Peter, you made me feel like I had to do it.’”

“Would you rather me have done that, or be honest?” asked Neal, smirking.

“Definitely honest,” said Peter. “Your head really still hurts? Want me to see if the nurse can give you some ibuprofen or something?”

“No thanks,” said Neal. He hit the morphine button. “Maybe this thing isn’t really working.”

To Neal’s surprise, Peter took his hand off of Neal’s chest and moved it to his head, where he began to lightly massage the crown. Immediately, Neal’s headache receded, and Neal let out a long sigh.

“Better?” asked Peter.

“So much better. Keep doing that,” said Neal.

“I do it for Elizabeth when she has a headache that won’t go away,” murmured Peter. “Let me know if I hit any spots that are better or worse.”

Neal closed his eyes and gave in to the sensation. He couldn’t remember the last time he had had a head massage. Maybe when he was in Paris, at that salon on the Champs Elysees. A lifetime ago.

Peter’s fingers moved in small circles around his temples, then down at the base of his skull, and back up to the top of his head again, in a hypnotizing rhythm. Neal reveled in the sudden lack of pain and the relief he was feeling.

After a while, Peter’s hand stilled, then brushed lightly over his hair. He opened his eyes.

“Thanks,” he said.
“You’re welcome. You said your muscles were stiff?”

“Yeah. It’s just because I can’t really move, but I’ll be fine in the morning.”

Peter stood and reached into his pocket. He pulled out a set of keys, rifled through them, and before Neal could ask what he was doing, Peter had unlocked the cuff around his left wrist. He leaned across the bed and unlocked the right one, and then did the same with the ankle restraints.

Neal was almost afraid to talk. He didn’t know what Peter had in mind. Was he going to be allowed to stand up? Walk around? He was still hooked up to these machines and the IV, he couldn’t go far.

But Peter picked up Neal’s left hand, and examined his wrist. He frowned at the red marks there.

“They should have soft restraints on you,” he said. “I’ll call about it.”

Then he slowly pulled Neal’s left arm up and rotated it until it was stretched over his head.

“How is that?” asked Peter.

“It’s…” Neal let out a groan as the stretch set in. “It’s good. Holy…”

He closed his eyes again as Peter slowly and carefully manipulated all of his limbs into agonizingly good stretches, massaging the muscles as he went. He couldn’t help the little gasps of pleasure and groans of relief, and just let it all go until he felt entirely boneless.

He opened his eyes as Peter locked him back in. “I’d let you get up and move around,” he said. “But you’re all hooked up. Can you hold out until morning?”

Neal nodded. He couldn’t quite form words.

The door to the room swung open, and an orderly rolled in a folded up bed. He pushed it into a far corner, then set to unfolding it, snapping the braces into place. When he was finished, he smiled at Neal and Peter.

“There you go,” he said. “There are blankets and extra pillows in the wardrobe. Do you need anything else? Have you put in your dinner order yet?”

“Not yet,” said Peter. “Actually, there is one more thing. He’s been in these metal cuffs since this the officers put them on. Don’t you have any of the soft restraints? He’ll be in them until morning, and he’s already got bruising.”

The orderly nodded. “I’ll go scrounge some up. Be back in a bit.”

When he left, Neal gaped at Peter. “What’s going on?” he asked. He glanced over at the cot, and then pointedly back at Peter.

“Oh. Well, that bed isn’t big enough for both of us, but I thought if I was at least in the room—“

“No way,” said Neal.

“What?”

“No way. Peter, you are not staying here overnight.” He tried to make his voice as firm as possible. He may have been lying helpless – okay, sort of helpless – in a hospital bed, but on this, he wasn’t going to be ignored.
Peter shook his head. “Neal. Don’t argue with me about this. You’ve got—“

“No. It’s Elizabeth’s birthday. You shouldn’t even be here now. You should be with her. Weren’t you planning to take her to dinner?”

“I was, but she understands. I canceled the reservations. We’ll all go this weekend.”

So that was why Neal had heard the word reservations before. Peter was calling to cancel.

“Absolutely not. Call them back, tell them you’re coming. I’ll be okay here. I’m just going to sleep, anyway.”

Peter hesitated, searching Neal’s face. Neal did his best to portray a look of resolve.

“I don’t want to just leave you here,” said Peter. “You might…”

Neal stiffened. “You think I’m trying to get you to go so I can run. Didn’t we just talk about this? I told you—“

“Neal, I understand that you’re saying you won’t slip those cuffs and take off. I am even willing to believe you mean it. Right now. But what if you see an opportunity that you can’t pass up? Can you tell me you wouldn’t change your mind if escape became a real option?” Peter folded his arms across his chest, his lips spread into a thin line.

Unfortunately, since Neal had been thinking that same thing a few minutes earlier, he was finding it hard to contradict Peter. But he did want the man to leave, to get some rest, to spend time with his wife. So he decided to be completely honest.

“No, I can’t tell you that. I can’t, Peter. I am too used to making decisions for myself, based on my best interests. Those interests can shift rapidly. Right now, it’s in my interest to stay put. I’m not in the best shape, so it’s going to be hard to get anywhere on my own—“

“You could get Haversham to help,” said Peter.

“I could. And he would. Thanks for calling him, by the way,” Neal said. “I…it was good, to have him here for a while. I’m surprised he came.”

Peter blinked, and then his face relaxed slightly. “Me too, frankly. But I thought it was worth a shot. He’s charmed Elizabeth, you know. She thinks he’s ‘a delightful oddball.’”

Neal laughed. “He is a delightful oddball.” Then he got serious again. “Even if I got him to help me, I’m going to be on the run. I don’t have the energy to be on the run at the moment, which means I’m more likely to get caught, and that would be bad. It’s actually safer for me to stay put.”

Peter pursed his lips, thinking. After a moment, he asked, “Do you have resources to run?”

“What?”

“Resources. A stash. Do you have something to fall back on?”

Neal considered this question. On the one hand, he didn’t want to lie to Peter. He hadn’t, so far, and he was going to do his best to keep it that way. On the other, he didn’t want Peter to start looking for the stash he did indeed have.

“How could I?” Neal said. “After all, the only crime I’ve been convicted of is the bond forgery, and you have those. Everything else is all unsubstantiated rumor.”
Peter narrowed his eyes.

“Peter—“

“Never mind,” said Peter. “I don’t want to know.” He came back to the chair by the bed and sat. “Do you really want me to go?”

“I do,” said Neal. “Go, have a good time with your wife. I’ll be here in the morning, and you can closely monitor me then.”

Peter sighed. “Okay,” he said. “I’ll be here bright and early to spring you.”

He rose and reached out a hand. He hesitated a second, then patted Neal on the cheek.

“Tell Elizabeth happy birthday for me,” Neal said.

“I will do that. You need anything else?” Peter picked up his suit jacket, sliding his arms into the sleeves, and patted his pockets.

“I’m fine,” said Neal with a smirk.

Peter gave him a look, and then was out the door.

A while later, after Neal had choked down a bland hospital dinner, he was beginning to drift towards sleep, when he heard the door to his room click open. He was awake immediately, watching the shadowy figure slip inside and close the door quietly. The figure stayed hunched over as it moved toward the bed.

“Hey Moz,” said Neal.

The figure stood abruptly. “I thought you might be asleep,” Mozzie whispered.

“Almost but not quite. What are you doing back here? Did Peter call you again?”

Mozzie shook his head. “I was watching the hospital and saw him leave earlier. I decided to wait until it was dark, and then come help you escape. I figured you’d be halfway out the door by now.”

Neal frowned. This was what Peter had been worried about. If he chose to leave with Mozzie, he would be fulfilling Peter’s worst fears about him. It was too early to give up on earning Peter’s trust. Besides…it wasn’t a good idea to run right now.

“Okay,” said Mozzie. “There’s a cop outside—"

“There is?” Neal glanced at the door. Peter hadn’t said anything about leaving a guard, but it made sense. Or maybe that had nothing to do with Peter, and had been ordered by the Court.

“I got by him easily enough, he’s not much of a threat. You just need to slip the cuffs, we’ll get you unhooked and dressed, and run before the machines alert the staff that you’re not on them anymore.” Mozzie examined the buttons. “I wonder if it would make sense to do a false unhooking first, so that when they check on you and you’re fine, they’ll be lulled into security if they go off a second time.”

“Moz, I’m not running.”

“What do you mean?” Mozzie sounded completely confused, as if Neal had just told him that he’d been to the moon with Neil Armstrong, and could swear the moon landing had really happened.
“I mean, thank you for coming, but I’m not going anywhere tonight.”

Mozzie came closer. “Neal, I know that you feel this…gratitude toward the Suit for saving your life.”

“More than once,” Neal pointed out. Had Peter saved him three times now? He was losing count.

“And that might make you feel like you owe him something, or that you can trust him,” continued Mozzie. “But he’s still a Suit. He’s still trying to enslave you. Even if he says and you believe that it’s somehow different, you won’t be free.”

“It’s just practical—” Neal began, but Mozzie held up a hand.

He gestured at Neal’s restraints. “Case in point. Here you are, all locked up. You think that’s going to change once he buys your Contract? It’ll get worse. He’ll tighten his hold over you, physically and mentally, and then you’ll never be free. Even when you’re free, you won’t be. I’ve seen it happen.”

“Mozzie, if I run now, it’s not just Peter who will come after me. Friedrich will, too, and between the two of them…I’m not sure I’m up to the running I’ll have to do. I’m still not up to full strength from before.” Neal tried to make Mozzie understand his position. His decision not to run was purely strategic. Now was not the time to take the chance. He needed to wait for a better set of circumstances.

“Neal. When I said I’ve seen it happen…I’ve seen it happen to you.”

“You…what?” Now Neal was confused.

“It happened before. You got so involved that you couldn’t see the shackles, you thought they were something else. Affection. Love, even. Promises of a future.”

Mozzie was pleading with Neal, now, and Neal couldn’t quite wrap his brain around it. Before, when Peter was chasing him…sure, Neal had gotten a little obsessed. It was just because Peter was so damned smart. He knew, from the moment he had laid eyes on the man outside the bank, that they were well-matched. He liked the game, that was all. Sure, he teased Peter, left clues. Mozzie was furious with him about the clues, but Neal couldn’t help it. So maybe there was something to what Mozzie was saying.

Certainly, now that he was in Peter’s company for real, he felt a strong bond with the man, as though they had already had a significant relationship and were continuing it. Neal wasn’t sure that the grand chase they had conducted hadn’t been motivated by at least some affection. Moreover, the way Peter had been acting with him…he thought maybe that affection hadn’t been one-sided.

Did he want to see where that led? How much stronger it could get?

The idea made Neal both cold with dread at the thought of being so tied to someone else and at the same time warm and buzzing with anticipation. The way Peter kept placing a hand on his chest, the way he had massaged his arms and legs to work out the stiffness…

He shook his head to clear it. “So I like Peter, as a person. I respect him. Maybe we could be friends. But that’s not…that wasn’t what it was about before.” It wasn’t, he told himself. It couldn’t have been, not then. “Then, it was just about the challenge, the thrill of the chase.”

Mozzie snorted. “No,” he said. “I wasn’t talking about Peter, but…shit, Neal, you’re farther gone than I thought. Are you sleeping with him yet?”
Neal frowned, and couldn’t help the heat that was rising to his cheeks. “No, that’s not what this is about,” he snapped.

“I wasn’t talking about Peter,” said Mozzie, again. “Neal, I was talking about Kate.”

Neal froze.

“She’s still got her hooks in you, even while you’re falling for someone else. You spent years in her service, pretending it was true love. You let yourself get caught, put away for years, on the chance that you could find her and see her again. You’re still searching for her, even though she let you go. I’m just trying to make sure you don’t let that happen with someone else, because I’m not sure I can stand to watch it.”

Neal wet his lips. He was having trouble thinking. Kate…had loved him. That wasn’t the same thing as what was going on with Peter. Mozzie had him all turned around. Peter was helping him, and once his time was up, or once an opportunity – a good opportunity – presented itself, he’d be free to do what he wanted.

Which was to find Kate…but that was…

He loved Kate. Loved her. He loved the life they had, traveling the world, rubbing elbows with the rich and famous, sipping champagne and eating caviar, surrounded by art…that was what he wanted. He wanted that more than anything. This time with Peter was a means to an end.

He would always be grateful to Peter, but his reactions to Peter were the result of deprivation and bad experiences. The result of Friedrich and the way he had fucked with Neal’s mind.

Being free, finding Kate, that was the goal. Here, Mozzie was offering him a chance to do just that.

Maybe it was time to take it.
Lost

Chapter Summary

Did Neal run?

Chapter Notes

Hey guys, thanks for being patient! I'm still pretty busy but will do my best to get some good chapters in the next few weeks. I apologize this might make you throw things at me, but...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 26: Lost

Wednesday, June 30, 8:47PM

Peter watched his wife stretch languidly on the bed. She wore a smile that was part smug and part dazed, but when she turned her head and opened her eyes, they were one-hundred-percent satisfied. He reached out and trailed a finger along her shoulder and down the silky skin of her arm. How did she keep her skin so soft?

“Happy?” he asked, leaning in for a kiss. She smiled wider against his lips and hummed.

“Extremely,” she said, when he pulled back. “I’m glad we decided not to go out. This was better, and it’ll be more fun to have a celebratory dinner when Neal can join us over the weekend.”

Peter nodded. He had been thinking about that, too, how odd it felt to be home with just Elizabeth, Neal nowhere in sight. He wondered at how quickly he had gotten used to having Neal constantly by his side, and he was beginning to think that Elizabeth was experiencing a similar sensation.

He pulled her close, and she snuggled against him with a sigh. He hesitated to say what was on his mind, not wanting to draw the focus off of her and her birthday, but…she was the one who had mentioned Neal.

“I know it’s been less than a week, but he seems to be fitting in pretty well around here,” said Peter. “Don’t you think?”

“I do,” said Elizabeth. “But I always figured he would.”

“What do you mean?” asked Peter.

There was a pause, as if Elizabeth was gathering her thoughts. Finally, she said, “The people you choose to care about usually do.” When he didn’t respond right away, she continued. “Clinton, Diana, Hughes – the few individuals you have chosen to make a real part of your life – they’re not identical, but they’re cut from a similar cloth. Passionate, smart, focused, clever, able to appreciate simple victories while not losing sight of bigger dreams. Neal…is the same.”
Peter turned that over in his head. Neal was certainly all of the things Elizabeth said. He fastened on the first part, that he cared about Neal. He had already admitted that to her, and to himself, and now to Neal. But there was something…

“I’m not sure either of us would want Hughes moving in here,” he said, as a way of trying to articulate his question. It was enough, which didn’t surprise him, since El could read him like a book.

She laughed. “No, I suppose not,” she said. “They’re all pieces of the puzzle, though. The puzzle of Peter Burke. Each of these people, the things you choose to make a part of your life, they fit in different ways. Neal…his piece is bigger and more central than the others. He touches on more of you. So of course it’s different with him, and he sort of slides right in here, filling in the spaces.”

“He’s not a bigger piece than you are,” said Peter, tightening his arms. She nuzzled at his bicep, placed a kiss there.

“Of course not,” she said. “But then, I’ve been here longer. Had more time to spread out. In time…”

Peter held his breath. He wasn’t sure what El was about to say, and he wasn’t sure he was ready to hear whatever it was. But she just trailed off, letting the half-thought hang there.

He wondered what she had meant, that Neal was filling in spaces. He hadn’t thought he had any gaps in his life. He loved El, his job, New York…he was happy.

And yet, there was a niggling part of his brain that reminded him that there was a difference between being happily content and being truly happy. Hadn’t he pursued Neal with a laser focus for years, often at the expense of his marriage and other parts of his job? Hadn’t he looked forward to the empty thrill of his bi-monthly calls to Winters Correctional Camp, checking up on Neal?

Not to mention the fact that he seemed to constantly be searching Neal out with his eyes whenever the man was nearby, and how he couldn’t seem to stop touching him. He closed his eyes a moment, remembering giving Neal a massage to help with his stiff muscles, listening to his satisfied noises.

Peter’s eyes flew open. That was not the track he expected his mind to take.

He took a deep breath. Now wasn’t the time to be stressing over whatever was going on with his developing feelings toward Neal. Neal was like a little brother to him, someone whom he had to take care of, keep out of danger. He was literally going to be responsible for the kid. He couldn’t afford to confuse things.

“Hon,” said Elizabeth, “I would love nothing more than to have you stay here wrapped around me all night, but…speaking of Neal, don’t you think it’s time you got back?”

Peter pulled away slightly, allowing her to turn in his arms and look at him.

“Back where?” he asked.

“To the hospital. Neal shouldn’t be alone.”

Peter frowned. “But it’s your birthday,” he said.

“Yes, and it’s not my first and won’t be my last. You’ve done plenty for me. Go back. Check on him.” Her eyes said that she was being sincere.
He sighed. “It will be hard for him to resist the temptation to run, now that he’s off-collar,” Peter said.

Elizabeth shook her head. “That’s not what I mean. He’s not going anywhere, hon. But he needs you. He’s all alone, and hurting. He hasn’t spent a night without you since he got here, and he’s in an unfamiliar place.”

Peter’s heart clenched at the thought of Neal being woken by nightmares, restrained, and unable to handle it. He could hurt himself even more.

“El, are you absolutely sure this is what you want?” he asked.

She nodded. “Positive. Go be with him.”

He kissed her, hard. And then he rose from the bed to return to Neal’s side once more, wondering at how lucky he was to have El in his life.

An hour later, Peter strode through the main lobby and toward the elevators. He had left El tucked in bed with a bottle of wine and a couple of DVDs and the promise that he would call in the morning. He still felt a little bad for leaving, but he knew she was right; he needed to be with Neal.

As he stepped off of the elevator on the third floor, he felt a little bundle of anticipation stirring low in his stomach. He wondered if Neal would be asleep, and how Neal would react when he realized Peter had returned. Would he give Peter that wide-eyed, slightly awed stare, as if he couldn’t really process the fact that someone was standing by him? The one that broke Peter’s heart every time he saw it?

Peter shifted the small duffle he was carrying to his left shoulder. He had brought along some fresh clothes for Neal, as well as some non-hospital snacks and a couple of books and magazines. Just in case Neal was having trouble sleeping.

He reached room 317, and was surprised to see the posted Agent missing. Peter had specifically requested a detail to watch over Neal, to make sure he didn’t try to run.

He was standing at the door, peering through the small window into the darkened room, when he heard his name. He looked up and spotted the Agent walking briskly down the hall towards him, carrying a to-go coffee cup.

“Agent Burke,” the other Agent said with a wave. “I didn’t think you were coming back here tonight.”

“Change of plans,” said Peter. “Agent Styles, right?”

Styles nodded. “Right. There’s been no activity of note, so far,” he said.

Peter frowned. “Where were you? Why weren’t you here when I arrived?”

“I took a quick run to the restroom and to grab coffee,” Styles said, indicating the cup in his hand.

Peter’s frown deepened. “Do you usually abandon your post like that?”

Styles looked taken aback. “No sir,” he said. “They took Caffrey for some tests, said he would be gone an hour or so, and I just thought…..”

Oh. So Caffrey wasn’t in the room. That explained why Styles had taken a break. Peter nodded in
understanding.

“I see,” he said. “It’s fine, Styles.” He paused. “Did they say what kind of tests?”

Styles looked confused. “No, I…was I supposed to ask?”

“No. It’s fine.” He turned the doorknob, pushed the door open slightly, before turning back to Styles. “Listen, I’m here now, and I’m staying, so you can take off,” he said.

Styles thanked him, then set off down the hall.

Peter figured he’d set his bag in the room, then go out to the nurse’s station and try to figure out where they had taken Neal, and for what kind of tests. He frowned. He had personally spoken to Neal’s doctor that afternoon, and the doctor hadn’t mentioned any kind of additional tests. He hoped that nothing had gone wrong after he had left.

Once inside the room, he flipped on the light, dropped the bag in the corner, and looked around. The restraints were dangling from the bedrail, the bedclothes were jumbled. Peter squinted at the bed a moment before pushing a sheet aside. He found two burner phones tangled in the covers.

Two?

One was the one he had used to call Mozzie, the one Mozzie had handed off to Neal earlier in the week. The other was new. That rascal must have brought Neal a second phone when he visited.

Peter pushed the blankets around a bit more, found the third phone, the one he had given Neal.

He looked around again, and his eyes landed on the machinery beside the bed. Something was… off. It was beeping away quietly, nothing amiss. And yet…

Wait. Peter approached the machine and squinted at it. It was beeping quietly, nothing amiss. As if Neal was still hooked up to it. Obviously, that wasn’t the case, so it should be dormant. He followed the wires from the machine around to the floor behind the bed, and what he saw there gave him a chill.

It was a small electronic box. He got down on one knee to get a closer look. It was a small box that was no doubt sending signals to the machinery, to make it look like Neal was still there.

Peter jumped to his feet. His eyes landed on the restraints dangling from the bedrails. Three were undone, but the left wrist cuff was still locked, in a closed circle. As if it had been slipped, and not unlocked.

He stuck his head into the hall, saw the Agent. “Styles,” he called. The Agent, who was nearly to the corner, turned around.

“Yes, sir?”

“Did you see the orderlies or doctors who came to get Neal for the tests?” asked Peter.

Styles nodded, heading back towards Peter. “Yes. There was just one, an orderly. He wheeled a gurney in and then out a few minutes later with Neal, said they’d be back in an hour.”

“What did he look like?” asked Peter. His heart had begun to beat faster. He was dearly hoping that what he suspected was not true. “Was he short? Bald, or wearing a bad hairpiece?”

Styles looked confused. “He was…shorter than me. A little round, but not overweight, just…
compact, I guess. He was wearing glasses. He had hair, but I wasn’t paying enough attention to notice if it was real or not. Why?"

Peter’s blood had begun to turn cold. “Wait there,” he said.

“Was he cuffed to the gurney, or cuffed at all, when the orderly took him out?” asked Peter. “Think, Styles. It’s important.”

Styles furrowed his brow. “I don’t think so,” he said. “I’m pretty sure not. But…he was sort of out of it, so I didn’t think anything of it. Figured he wouldn’t give them any trouble in that state.”

Peter launched himself across the room to the wardrobe. Neal’s clothes were gone.

Damn it, Neal. You promised.

“Fuck,” Peter swore out loud, smacking a palm against the wall so hard it stung.

“Sir?” Styles was hovering in the door of the room, looking uncertain. “Is something wrong?”

“Yeah. You let our inmate walk out of here. That’s what’s wrong.” Peter spat out the words.

Styles straightened his shoulders. “Are you saying he…escaped?”

“That’s what I’m saying,” said Peter. He knew he was being harsh with the young Agent, who really didn’t know what Neal was capable of. And Peter hadn’t mentioned Haversham, that Neal might have outward assistance. It was really his own fault. “Look,” he said, “right now, I need to know everything – everything – you can think of about what happened this evening.

The Agent visibly swallowed. “Yes, sir,” he said. “Uh…a nurse came in a couple of times, about once every 90 minutes or so. An orderly showed up to deliver dinner around six, and a different orderly returned around seven-thirty to take away the tray. An orderly showed up shortly after that. He was in there a little while, maybe twenty minutes.”

“Were any of these orderlies the one who took Caffrey?”

Styles looked uncomfortable. “I’m not sure. Not the dinner ones, they were both larger, and one was African-American. But the one who came by after dinner might have been the one who showed up later with the gurney. It was…I was on the phone.”

Peter shook his head, and maintained control. “Okay. So the one who was in there a while, he left and…then what?”

Styles cleared his throat. “About twenty-five minutes ago, an orderly showed up with a gurney. Said he needed to take the patient for some additional tests, would take about an hour. He went in, and about ten minutes later, he wheeled Caffrey out. Like I said, Caffrey seemed out of it, like he had been given a sedative. I figured either he was groggy from waking up or they had given him something to relax him. I didn’t think anything of it.”

Peter checked his watch. It was just after ten. “So they left about fifteen minutes ago?” he asked. “Did Caffrey say anything to you?”

Styles nodded. “Yeah, he said something, but it didn’t make any sense, so I just told him good luck.”

“What did he say?”
“I’m not completely sure I understood him, but it sounded something like ‘don’t take me to Vegas.’ Like I said, it didn’t make sense.”

Vegas. Could that be…

Peter froze. When he spoke, his voice was flat. “Could it have been, ‘don’t let Vegas take me?’” he asked.

Styles paused. “Yeah…I might have switched the words in my head to try to understand them. So I guess…yeah. Does that make any sense to you?”

“It does,” said Peter. “Styles, I’m going to need your help. I think Neal is in danger.”

He pulled out his phone and made a call. “Jones, I need you and Diana and anyone else you can get your hands on to St. David’s now. We’ve got a manhunt to conduct.”

* WC – WC – WC – WC – WC – WC – WC *

Wednesday, June 30, 10:04PM

Neal felt like he was swimming in a pool of oatmeal. He couldn’t really see, everything was a greyish haze. And when he tried to move, he felt like it took a long time before his muscles responded to his commands.

And…he was having trouble breathing. Each breath was like trying to inhale solid substance.

He shook his head, trying to clear it. Attempted to stretch his neck, to get more air. He had to stay awake. He had to…

What?

He couldn’t remember what was going on, and what he was trying to do. Just that he needed to breathe. And…get away. From something.

He tried to focus, tried to pull reality back in front of the haze. Mozzie…he had sent Mozzie home. Told him to sit tight and wait, that he wasn’t ready to leave Peter.

Peter.

That was it. He needed to get to Peter. They had taken him…not they. Someone. Had taken him… somewhere.

Maybe he was floating in something. That’s why he couldn’t feel anything, couldn’t breathe. He needed to breathe.

Just…he’d take a break. Rest a second, try again. Drift a bit…

* WC – WC – WC – WC – WC – WC – WC *

Wednesday, June 30, 10:04PM

Peter shoved his badge at the window of the security booth.

“FBI. I need to see footage of third floor west for the past 30 minutes. Now.”

The security guard blinked at him.
“Now means at this second. Pull up the footage.” Peter slammed his palm against the glass, and the security guard jumped.

“Hang on,” he said. “Jesus—“

“Listen to me,” said Peter. “One of the patients was under protection and has gone missing in the last 30 minutes. I need to see where he was taken. This is a matter of life and death. Move!”

That seemed to do the trick. The guard swiveled in his chair and hit a button. The door to the room buzzed, and Peter yanked it open, charging inside. The guard had swiveled back to the screens and was fiddling with a keyboard and a set of dials. Peter tried not to lose patience but it was getting close.

Finally, the guard pointed to one of the screens. “There,” he said. “We’ve only got the one camera on each hall, so we’ll have to look at each separately. What room was he in?”

“317,” said Peter.

The guard clacked at the keyboard and then nodded at the screen. Peter could see Styles standing outside Neal’s room, down towards the end of the hall.

“Can you speed it up?”

The guard turned a knob slightly, and after a moment, a man came into view, pushing a gurney. He paused outside Neal’s room, talking to Styles, and then went inside. A moment later, he came back out, now with Neal on the gurney. He talked to Styles again, and then set off down the hallway, toward the camera.

Peter’s eyes widened as the gurney moved close to the camera before disappearing out of range. Neal was moving sluggishly around on the gurney, the “orderly” holding him down with one hand on his chest. The clear morphine bag was at Neal’s side. He was still hooked up to it, but directly, with no regulator in between.

Shit.

“I need to see where they went,” said Peter. Too much time had already gone by. Too much time. A morphine overdose could happen quickly.

The guard clacked at the keyboard, and then took over. On a series of recordings, they watched the gurney go down one corridor, into an elevator out, down another corridor. Finally, the “orderly” – who wasn’t Mozzie – looked around at an empty hallway, opened a door, and pushed Neal inside. A moment later, he came back out alone and took off down the corridor.

“Where is that?” asked Peter. “What’s that door?”

The guard squinted. “A supply closet on the second floor east. Near the labs. They would be nearly deserted this time of night, only a couple of employees working.”

“Okay. Listen closely.” Peter planted a hand on the guard’s shoulder and squeezed. “Contact emergency and tell them that there’s a patient with a potential morphine overdose wherever that closet is. Then wait here. Two more agents will be showing up shortly. I need you to figure out where that orderly went after leaving that closet, and tell the agents. Understand?”

Without waiting for an answer, Peter shot out of the guard room. Styles was waiting, looking anxious. “Get in touch with Diana Berrigan or Clinton Jones and tell them to meet you here. I want
that man found.” He raced down the hall to the stairwell, barely registering Styles’ affirmative
response.

He took the stairs two at a time to the second floor, and burst out, looking around wildly. The sign
on the wall helpfully pointed towards the laboratories in one direction, and he sprinted that way,
desperately praying that he wasn’t too late.

A voice came over the loudspeaker, announcing a Code Blue. The guard must have successfully
gotten in touch with emergency, and they were taking it seriously. Good.

Peter skidded to a halt in the hallway with the labs. He sort of recognized it from the tape. On the
left were the double doors that were about twenty feet from where Neal had been taken. That
meant…

There.

When Peter reached the door, he grabbed the handle and yanked it down. To his utter relief, it
wasn’t locked. He wrenched it open and peered into the semi-darkness. It wasn’t really a closet,
but more like a supply room, with shelving creating a barrier that he couldn’t see past without
venturing inside.

“Neal!” he shouted. “Are you there?”

He paused. He could hear something. It sounded like a slow, dry, rasping. Like someone struggling
to breathe and not succeeding.

He fumbled around one the wall until he found a light switch and flicked it on, illuminating tall
metal shelving units. He charged forward.

“Neal?”

Finally, somewhere toward the back of the maze of shelves, he spotted the edge of the gurney. He
shoved a pile of boxes out of the way and pulled the gurney towards him.

Neal lay there, unmoving. The dry rasping sound was softer now, slower.

“Neal,” shouted Peter, shaking him. “Neal, you have to open your eyes. Do you hear me? Open
your goddamned eyes.”

Neal was unresponsive. As Peter shook him, his hand brushed up against the morphine bag. It was
nearly empty. He cursed, then yanked the sheet off of Neal and found his hand. The intravenous
needle was still inserted, but the morphine tube had been yanked out.

Good boy, Neal, thought Peter. His relief was minimal, however. The kid had clearly gotten
enough of the medication to trigger overdose symptoms. He was barely breathing, unconscious,
and though the light was bad, Peter could tell his skin was tinged with greyish blue, indicating
failure in circulation. He didn’t have long.

“Okay, kiddo,” said Peter. “There’s not much I can do until they get here, but if you can hear me,
you’ve got to stay with me. I’m not ready to let you go, just yet. Besides, I’ve been working too
hard to lose this game now. Wouldn’t be fair. So give me a hand and stick around a few more
minutes.”

Peter stopped, running a hand over Neal’s forehead, through his hair, back around to his chest. He
could feel a heartbeat, but it was slow, and weak. He began speaking urgently, hoping that maybe
the sound of his voice would get through and help Neal to hang on long enough for help to arrive.

“Listen, Neal…I don’t know if you can hear me in there, but you asked me a question, twice now, and I haven’t really given you an answer. I joked with you, and said I didn’t really know, and sidestepped. Like you do. But I feel like you deserve to know.”

He brushed at Neal’s cheek, closed his eyes, took a deep breath.

“You wanted to know why I was helping you. Sure, there’s the fact that I don’t approve of ESIA and don’t think anyone deserves what you were going through. But more than that…this is personal, for me. If it had been anyone else, I’d have tried to help, I hope. But with you…I couldn’t just let you go. Because it’s you, I had to – have to – do everything in my power to make sure you’re all right.

“You mean something to me…I think maybe you always have, ever since we met. You’re more than just a kid I caught and put away. I called you my friend, but I think it’s more than that, too. I don’t know exactly what I feel about you. I just know you’re important to me.”

He laughed softly.

“Elizabeth knows it. She’s pointed it out to me more than once. She thinks you’re special, an important part of my life. And she’s a smart woman. She’s usually right about this kind of thing. So…I guess I’m saying that I care about you. About you, Neal Caffrey the person. Not just Neal Caffrey the brilliant criminal who can help the FBI, but you yourself. So…stick around a bit, okay?”

There was one loud, harsh rasp of breath, and then silence.

“Neal?” Peter placed two fingers on Neal’s pulse point, felt nothing.

No.

“Neal. Come on. Don’t give up,” said Peter. He blinked furiously at the wetness in his eyes, felt the panic tightening his chest. “Damn you. Do not fucking give up, not after what I’ve just told you or…or I swear to god I’ll—” Losing control, he let his fist slam onto Neal’s chest three times. He froze.

Jesus, Burke. Keep it together. He just stopped breathing. Help is coming. You’ve got CPR training. Use it.

Peter took a deep breath, trying to focus. He examined Neal a moment, then pushed him around a bit until he was lying flat on his back on one side of the gurney. He climbed up onto the other side, resting on his knees, and placed his hands over Neal’s chest.

With one more deep breath, he began chest compressions, counting to thirty.

When he had reached thirty, he tilted Neal’s head back and lifted his chin to open his airway.

He hovered his cheek next to Neal’s mouth. No breath. Okay. He could do this.

He placed his mouth over Neal’s, pinched Neal’s nose shut, and breathed in gently. He lifted his head, noting that Neal’s chest had risen with the breath. Lowering his mouth to Neal’s once more, he gave a second rescue breath.

Peter returned to chest compressions, and began the cycle. He kept up the rhythm by chanting in
his head, not to the BeeGees *Stayin’ Alive*, like he had been taught, but instead a repeated loop of *Neal please Neal please Neal please*...

*Neal, please*...

Chapter End Notes

Safety note: Unless you have CPR training, you should not attempt rescue breaths, as it can be very dangerous if done wrong. Call 911, and stick with chest compressions only, and make sure you understand how to do it properly. Read up! CPR certification courses are offered in many places. A lot of schools and employers offer them free of charge.
Hi all! Thanks again for your patience. I was halfway through this chapter when I experienced a death in the family and had to fly cross country without notice. I'm back, and trying to get in a handful of updates before my schedule gets crazy again. However, as I've just seen, you never really can tell when something is going to blow your carefully laid plans to smithereens. I feel close to Peter and Neal in that way...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 27: Movement

Wednesday, June 30, 11:47PM

Some days seemed to stretch on forever, each moment requiring effort equivalent to hauling bricks up the side of a mountain. On those days, you had to keep putting one foot in front of the other, tackling each step as if it’s the only and possibly the last.

As an F.B.I. Agent, Peter was no stranger to these kinds of days. It happened all too often that a case was urgent enough and the trail was hot enough that he had to grit his teeth, put his head down, and plow forward, not thinking too far ahead or too far behind. Movement, on these days, was his friend, because as soon as he paused, the fatigue, doubts, and anxiety would creep in and overwhelm.

Which was why he was trudging down the hospital hallway, eyelids heavy and eyes gritty, aches radiating from his neck down through his spine.

They had told him to go home, get some rest. They. Everyone.

Diana and Jones had checked in just a few minutes earlier, and Diana had looked at him with a deep, concerned frown.

“Boss, you look like you’ve been hit by a truck,” she said.

Jones smacked her shoulder and looked away, embarrassed…which meant he agreed but was too polite to come out and say it.

He waved away the criticism. “Talk to me about Antoine Vega,” he said. “Any luck tracking him down?”

Diana shook her head. “We tracked him on the hospital security cams out a rear delivery entrance, but lost him after that.”

“We put in a request to pull footage from any camera in a two block radius, in the hopes we can catch him getting into a vehicle,” Jones added. “But that’ll take time.”

Peter had made an ugly noise and slammed his fist into the wall. Both his agents jumped, not used to seeing such displays of physical frustration from their level-headed boss.
“Maybe you should go home. Tell Elizabeth what’s going on, get some sleep.” Diana had said, her tone cautious and tentative. She eyed the way he was rubbing his bruised knuckles, so he stopped, flexing his hand and then forcing it down by his side.

He shook his head. “I’m not going anywhere,” he said.

“Then maybe just find a spot to lie down for a while,” said Jones, interjecting. “Neal would want —”

“Enough,” said Peter. He was in no mood to hear what Neal would want. How was Jones supposed to know what Neal would want? Peter was the one who knew him.

*He’d tell you to go home,* said an incredibly annoying voice in the back of Peter’s head that sounded suspiciously like Neal. *Go home, get some sleep. You’ve had a long day. Have a beer, kiss your wife, and don’t worry about your dumbass con.*

“Shut up,” muttered Peter.

Diana and Jones blinked at him, and he realized he had spoken out loud. Maybe he was a little too exhausted to function.

“Sorry,” he said, with a sheepish smile. “You’re right. I’ll get some sleep. You guys—”

“We’ll stay on Vega,” said Jones. “Don’t worry, we got this.”

“Thanks,” Peter said, grateful once again that he had the best team in the F.B.I.

“Keep us posted,” said Diana, “and we’ll do the same.” She reached out and squeezed his shoulder before the pair of them turned and strode down the hallway and out of sight.

Now, Peter kept moving. He paced the hallway seven, eight, nine times, knowing that if he just kept going he’d be okay. On his tenth trip, he stumbled slightly and staggered into a wall.

*Shit.*

After a moment’s hesitation, Peter sank into one of the hard plastic chairs that were set against the walls in the hallway of the ICU and buried his head in his hands. If he needed to rest, this would have to do. He really appreciated everyone’s advice, and knew it was good advice, but he couldn’t bring himself to walk away. Inside the room, not fifteen feet away, was Neal. He had walked away from Neal once already today, he wasn’t about to do it again, not when Neal…

He pushed to his feet again, and moved to the doorway.

Agent Styles was sitting in a chair by Neal’s bed, and he stood when Peter made his appearance.

“Thanks for staying, Styles,” said Peter, his voice rough.

Styles nodded. “I feel…” he glanced down at Neal, and grimaced. “I’m responsible for this,” he said.

Peter shook his head. “You’re not. Antoine Vega is responsible. And Carl Friedrich, of that I have no doubt. And me. I should have briefed you more carefully, or stayed myself. I knew there was danger, but I got distracted by the concern that the immediate danger came from Neal, not to him.”

“If you want to go home, get some rest, I promise I’m not going anywhere, and I don’t make the same mistake twice,” said Styles.
“No. Can’t do that.” Peter moved into the room. “Tell you what, let me post up in here. You can hang out in the hall, if you want.”

Styles nodded. “I’ll be within shouting distance,” he said. He gave Peter a sympathetic look on his way out.

Peter walked around the bed to the chair Styles had just vacated. He dropped into it, glad it was slightly more comfortable than the chairs in the hallway. Sliding it closer to the bed, he examined his convict.

Neal was barely recognizable, stretched out on the hospital bed and hooked up to what seemed like a million machines. There was a respirator, breathing for him, and countless monitors, and several IV lines. His skin was frighteningly pale to the point of near-translucence. Peter could make out the blue lines of Neal’s veins on his arms and by his temple.

He picked up Neal’s right hand, careful not to dislodge the IV, and curled his fingers around Neal’s trying to give them some warmth. Neal wasn’t restrained. There was no need, at the moment. If…when he woke up, he wouldn’t be able to extract himself from the respirator.

He was going to be scared, Peter realized. He had been scared before he lost consciousness. He was going to wake up scared, with tubes down his throat and confused about what was going on, still undoubtedly in the middle of the real life nightmare. Peter tightened his grip on Neal’s hand and swallowed thickly.

“I’m sorry,” whispered Peter. He closed his eyes, and was immediately back in the moment where he thought everything was lost.

Neal, please… The phrase went round and round in Peter’s head as he desperately tried to bring the kid back.

During the third round of rescue breaths, he heard a commotion out in the hall, and then there was chaos around him. Hands were pulling him off of the gurney and shoving him out of the way, shouting questions.

He stumbled backwards and flattened himself against the wall, making room for the medical personnel.

“He stopped breathing, no pulse,” said Peter. “I was here when it stopped, he was…he was still alive when I got here.”

“When was that?” asked a doctor, glancing over her shoulder.

“Three…three cycles,” said Peter. “Three rounds of compressions and breathing.”

She nodded, and turned back to Neal. “We’ve got to get him out of here,” she said to the others. “There’s not enough room.”

Peter backed out of the supply room, his eyes never leaving the team surrounding Neal. One of the doctors was up on the gurney, continuing CPR. Two were pushing and shoving at boxes and shelves to make a wider path, and the doctor who had spoken with Peter was maneuvering the gurney out into the hall where a defibrillator and other machines were waiting.

Once outside the room, they got down to work, yelling “clear” and making Neal’s limp body jolt upwards with the electric shock.
Too many shocks, thought Peter frantically. He’s had too many shocks today.

He wanted to shout it at the doctors, but instead pressed himself against the wall, hands scrabbling at the smooth, cold surface, and bit through his bottom lip until he tasted blood.

After an eternity – in reality, less than two minutes – the lead doctor said the words that made Peter sag against that wall. “We’ve got a pulse.”

But then – “He’s still not breathing.”

There was another flurry of action, and before Peter could ask what was going on, Neal was intubated and a ventilator was doing his breathing for him.

Peter watched the team visibly relax, as they hooked up monitors and fiddled with settings. The lead doctor looked around and spotted him. She smiled.

“Hey,” she said. “Good job in there. You saved his life.”

“Yeah. So he’s…going to be okay?” Peter was still on high alert, in case he needed to jump into action again.

“Let’s hope so,” she said. “If it really was only a couple of minutes before we got there, and you kept the circulation and oxygen flowing properly, his chances of full recovery are great.”

“What’s happening now?” asked Peter. The team had begun to move Neal and his equipment down the hall.

“We’re moving him to the ICU,” she said. “I’ll put him on a Narcan drip to counteract the effects of the morphine, and we’ll monitor him from there.”

“Okay.” Peter nodded, and kept nodding, as though reassuring himself that this was good and things were under control. “How long until he wakes up?”

The doctor gave him a sympathetic look. “Sorry to say we don’t know. It depends on the extent of the overdose. Could be hours. You look…exhausted. You should go home, get some rest. We’ll call when he wakes up.”

Obviously, Peter hadn’t listened. He had simply made his way up to the ICU, found Neal’s room, and stayed.

Now, he felt his eyes drooping. He moved the chair closer still so that he could lay his head on the bedrail. It wasn’t comfortable, but it would do.

“I’m here, Neal,” said Peter. “Try and shake me now.”

* WC – WC – WC – WC – WC – WC – WC *

Thursday, July 1, 4:24AM

Peter woke up when he got hit in the face.

He sat up straight, eyes wide, glancing around and trying to get his bearings.

Neal was flailing on the bed, arms thrashing about. That was what had hit Peter. Right, ICU. Neal. Peter jumped to his feet, grabbed at Neal’s hands.
“Hey,” he said. “Neal, stop. You’re okay.”

It didn’t seem to do the trick, because Neal continued to thrash, his head whipping back and forth on the pillow, his hands fighting against Peter’s, trying to reach up toward his face.

“Neal, you’re on a ventilator,” said Peter. “It’s helping you breathe, stop.” He tilted his head up towards the door and shouted, “can we get some help in here?”

A doctor bustled into the room and went straight to Neal’s side. “Neal?” he said. “Calm down. I’m going to take the tubes out, but you have to calm down first.”

Neal immediately stilled. He was rigid, and his chest was heaving. The machine by the bed was beeping wildly. Peter stepped back to give the doctor room to work.

The doctor performed a couple of quick maneuvers, and before he knew what was happening, Neal was coughing out the intubation tubes. He continued coughing, and the doctor brought him a cup of water with a straw.

“Sip,” he said. “Not too much.”

Neal managed to get the straw in his mouth and pull up a sip of water. After a minute, the coughing subsided, and Neal was taking deep, ragged breaths. The beeping on the monitor slowed but did not stop entirely.

“Okay,” said the doctor. “Let me just check you out.”

Peter waited while the doctor checked on Neal’s vitals, asked Neal to follow her finger as it swept back and forth and up and down. Neal’s heart rate slowed to almost normal.

“How are you feeling?” asked the doctor. “Can you talk?”

The first sound that came out of Neal’s mouth was raspy and caused another coughing fit. After another round of sipping water and breathing deeply, he tried again.

“What happened?”

“Just answer a few questions for me, first,” she said. She asked him about the date, recent world events, basic questions about himself. When he said I’d rather not talk about the President in polite company, she chuckled.

“Doc, what’s the path forward from here?” asked Peter. “Now that he’s awake, when will he be released?”

She pursed her lips and looked down at Neal. “We’ll monitor him here for a while, and once I’m confident he’s doing well without support, we’ll move him back to his regular room,” she said. “I’d like to keep him overnight for observation.”

The lines around Neal’s eyes deepened as he began to look more strained. “Is it completely necessary to keep him overnight, again?” Peter asked.

She sighed. “Look, I can’t keep him once I’m sure the morphine has cleared if you don’t agree to it. I’m just recommending the monitoring. His body has been through a lot in the past couple of days, his heart especially.”

Peter looked to Neal. “Neal, what do you want?” he asked.
Neal blinked up at him, the slight surprise at being included in the conversation heartbreaking to Peter. He glanced back and forth between them and then dropped his eyes.

“I’d like to go home,” he said, quietly.

Peter nodded. “And I’d like to take him home,” he said, firmly. “As soon as you think it’s reasonably safe.”

She thought for a moment. “It’s early in the day. He’s young, relatively healthy,” she said. “And being in a place he feels comfortable may be best for him. How about this? Stay until this evening, and if everything goes well, I’ll recommend release rather than an overnight stay.”

“Thank you,” said Peter. He turned to Neal, rested a hand on his shoulder. “Okay?”

“Sounds great. So can you tell me what happened?” Neal asked.

“What do you remember?” asked the doctor.

“I…I was asleep. Then I…” he scrunched his eyebrows together. “Vega,” he said, his eyes going wide and his heart rate increasing again.

Peter jumped forward. “He’s gone,” he said, grabbing up Neal’s hand again. Neal’s head swiveled and his eyes found Peter. He relaxed, the beeping on the monitor slowing once more. “He took off. Diana and Jones are on it.”

“I’ll leave you two to talk,” said the doctor. He focused on Peter a moment. “As temporary owner of record, I’ll need your signature on the treatment papers,” he said. Peter nodded, and the doctor turned back to Neal. “You’re a lucky guy. He saved your life, you know.”

Neal closed his eyes. “It’s kind of what he does, I guess,” he said. Peter thought he almost sounded sad about it, defeated, and he determined to get to the bottom of that.

The doctor exited the room, and Neal opened his eyes again. Peter smiled down at him.

“Hey there,” he said.

Neal sighed. “This is getting to be a ridiculous habit. I’m over waking up to find you at my bedside, aren’t you?”

“Nope,” said Peter. “Like you said, it’s what I do. I’m the official Neal Caffrey Lifesaving Officer now. They gave me a badge and everything.”

“So how did you do it this time?” asked Neal. “Wrestle Vega off of me?”

Peter scowled. “I wish,” he said. “When I get my hands on him he’s going to…anyway.” He stopped his train of thought, alarmed at the intensity of the anger he felt towards the man. He tried to smile again, relax his features. “It was the morphine. The overdose stopped your breathing and your heart.”

Neal’s eyes widened. “Hang on a second. I died?”

Peter shook his head. “Not really. I mean, maybe technically. But I was there, so…CPR certified. I kept your blood flowing and breathed for you until the doctors arrived and they took over.”

Neal squinted at him, then a look of…something that Peter couldn’t quite identify…passed across his face. There was a hint of a smile, and he brought a hand to his lips, turned his head to the left,
and stared at nothing with a far-off gaze.

“You breathed for me?” Neal asked. Then he muttered softly. “Man, I miss all the good stuff.”

Peter let the comment hang in the air. He didn’t know quite how to take it. What did Neal mean, the good stuff? He couldn’t mean…

…and if he did, was that what was causing the blush to rise on Peter’s cheeks? Couldn’t be, in either case.

He cleared his throat. “It looks like we’ve got some time to kill,” he said. “Should I have Agent Styles make a run to the gift shop for a deck of cards?”

Neal’s answering grin was blinding.

* WC – WC – WC – WC – WC – WC – WC *

**Thursday, July 1, 6:25PM**

They had passed the day companionably, playing cards, reading magazines, talking about nothing. Aside from the fact that he was in a breezy hospital gown and still hooked up to machines, Neal couldn’t remember having had a more relaxing and pleasant day in…a very long time.

He had soundly beaten Peter at several hands of gin in a row before Peter started watching him shrewdly, trying to figure out how he was cheating. He was cheating, of course…not to win, but to see if Peter could spot it. Eventually playing actual hands gave way to a cheater’s tutorial, and by the end of it, Peter was palming face cards and dealing from the bottom of the deck like a pro.

“You know,” said Neal at one point, “this is how I met Mozzie.”

“Cheating at cards?” asked Peter. “Let me guess, a backroom poker game with high stakes?”


Peter raised an eyebrow. “And he didn’t kill you?”

“He was impressed at my skill, tracked me down, and became my mentor.”

“You’ve known him a long time,” said Peter.

“Not much longer than you, actually,” said Neal. “We were getting cash for our first major con by cashing in that bond when you and I met in front of that bank—“

“Yeah, let’s bring up one of my least proud instances of you outsmarting me—“

“Well, don’t beat yourself up,” said Neal with a smirk. “I had an advantage there. I knew you were a fed. To you, I was just some guy who was worried about his money.”

“You definitely put the charm on me,” said Peter, remembering. “Giving me that innocent look of concern, a smile of appreciation, all in an adorable package.”

Neal blinked at Peter. Peter had thought he was adorable?

“That’s your Achilles’ heel as well as your ace in the hole,” said Peter. “Your looks get you passage but people remember you.”
Neal shrugged. “It’s usually not a huge problem.”

“I remembered you. Why do you think it was so easy for me to fasten in on you once I saw the first potential sketch? I knew in a second you were that cute kid I met in front of that damned bank.” Peter reached out and ruffled Neal’s hair, and Neal ducked his head. “Anyway, let’s hear more about that first major con you and Mozzie pulled…”

Neal snorted. “These painkillers must be making me dopey,” he said. “I probably shouldn’t have even said that much.”

“It’s all right.” Peter shrugged and smiled fondly. “I won’t pursue it. But maybe you’re right. Better quit while you’re ahead. You know, someday I would like to hear all about…everything.”

Neal considered that a moment. He trusted Peter, to more of an extent that he had thought possible. On the other hand, Peter was a federal agent and had an obligation to pursue criminals for crimes they had committed.

“Someday I’ll tell you…everything,” said Neal, knowing that that was a promise he might not be able to keep. Here, though, in this moment, he meant it. He wanted to tell Peter about his life. Maybe someday he’d be able to.

He did tell Peter what had happened the night before. Peter had gone back to his new habit of resting his hand on Neal’s chest while he recounted the tale.

Neal had gone to sleep after he decided he wasn’t going to run and Mozzie left. He didn’t know how long it was before he was awakened again by someone at his bedside. He opened his eyes, blinking into the darkness. Why wouldn’t the nurse or the doctor have turned on a light?

The man standing beside his bed was wearing the outfit of an orderly, and fussing with the machines. Neal watched him a moment.

“Hi,” he said.

The man glanced at him, surprised, then turned his face away, ducking it into the shadows. “Go back to sleep,” he said, his voice rough. “I’m just adjusting your medications.”

“Why?” asked Neal. There was something about the man’s voice that was familiar. He tried to shake the sleep and medication fog from his brain.

“To make you more comfortable,” said the man. “You were tossing and turning. Don’t worry about it.”

Neal couldn’t remember having any nightmares, but maybe he had. His neck and head didn’t hurt nearly as much anymore, so he didn’t think that had been keeping him restless, but…

The man turned to Neal then, and placed a hand on his arm. “Quiet, now,” he said.

Vega. Neal gasped when he realized who it was. Antoine Vega was no orderly. If he was here, that meant –

He stiffened as he felt a pinch in his arm, and that was when he noticed the needle sinking into his flesh. He tried to pull away, but Vega’s grip was too tight.

“What are you—“
“Shhhh,” said Vega.

Neal’s eyelids drooped. He tried to force them open, but could only manage halfway.

“What did you do?” he asked, his voice slurring.

He fought against it, but felt himself slipping into unconsciousness, his last thought being that he wished Peter were there.

“Next thing I knew, I woke up in the ICU,” said Neal.

“Vega only showed up that one time?” asked Peter. “He didn’t come by earlier?”

Neal squinted at Peter. Something about the look on his face...he was fishing for information. Realization dawned after a moment. The Agent who was guarding the room must have mentioned that multiple “orderlies” showed up.

“Mozzie visited again,” said Neal. “Right after dinner, while I was thinking about trying to sleep.”

Peter nodded. “I thought he might. What did he want?”

Neal eyed Peter, but decided to be honest. “He wanted to help me run.”

Peter’s hand pressed down on Neal’s chest, that possessive physical signal he was developing.

“You didn’t want to go?” asked Peter, his voice cautious, even. His eyes were locked on Neal’s, as if he could see down into his soul. Maybe he could. Maybe Neal was allowing him to, for some reason.

Honesty it was, then. “I wouldn’t say that. I considered it.”

Peter let out a sharp breath, clenched his teeth.

“But I had told you I wouldn’t,” said Neal, bringing his hand to rest on top of Peter’s. He waited until Peter relaxed slightly. “And it wasn’t practical. If I ran now, before the arbitration, I’d have you and Friedrich on my heels. I’m not at my best. Not even close. I don’t know about Friedrich, but you’d catch me.”

“I would,” said Peter. “I’m a proven pro at it, and now I have a personal stake.”

Neal let that sit for a moment before continuing. “Also...maybe I didn’t want to go, not really. Not yet. Not until I could see if...”

He trailed off, not sure how exactly to finish that sentence. He knew how he wanted to finish it, but he wasn’t ready to think it, let alone say it out loud. So he went in a different direction.

“...until I could see if I could get clear of all charges. Be really free and not have to run anymore,” he said.

Peter eyed him. “You know that in order to be truly free you’d have to give it up, right? No more cheating at cards, forgery, conning billionaires or whatever you did that I don’t know about yet.”

Neal nodded. “I know.”
“Do you think you could do that?” asked Peter. His voice had gotten quiet, and was laced with something like hope.

Neal shrugged. “Honestly? I’m not sure. But if I stick around, work with you…”

“Maybe you’ll find out,” finished Peter. He rubbed his hand in a circle on Neal’s chest, and Neal felt so centered and present and unconcerned with anything outside of that room it would have brought him to his knees if he hadn’t already been lying down.

And that realization was chilling.

Neal blinked and shook his head. “Wow. Too much honesty. Definitely need to stop taking those painkillers,” he said, trying to laugh off the intensity of the conversation.

Peter let him, and flicked on the television so they could zone out for a while.

Later, just after the orderly had come to take the dinner tray away – this time, Peter had ordered his own dinner and they had traded bites of mushy turkey and gravy for bites of mushy lasagna – the doctor returned to have Peter sign a bunch of paperwork.

“You’re free to go,” she said, after she had unhooked Neal from his IVs and equipment. “If you experience anything unusual – palpitations, racing pulse, headaches – come right back, do you understand?” She jabbed her finger at both of them.

“Thank you,” said Peter. “I’ll make sure to bring him back if necessary.”

She nodded and shook their hands. “It’s been a pleasure, gentlemen. I hope I never see you again.”

After she left, Peter rubbed his hands together. “All right,” he said. “Let’s get you dressed and ready. I’ll call for the wheelchair and we’ll get out of this joint.”

He placed a stack of clothing on the bed next to Neal: a new pair of pants, a soft short-sleeved shirt, underwear. Neal grinned. “These are new. You went and got these for me?” he asked.

Peter shrugged. “I had El pick them up. Your other clothes disappeared,” he said. “I thought maybe Vega was trying to make it look like you escaped.”

Neal shook his head. “Mozzie took them,” he said. “I asked him to have them cleaned and repaired.”

Peter helped Neal into the bathroom, where he took his time getting dressed. He had to. He wasn’t moving very quickly, his entire body sore and creaky. He was looking forward to getting home and into his own bed.

When he opened the door, Peter was standing there, waiting. He held out another item. “Put this on,” he said.

Neal peered at it. It was a vest, he realized. A bulletproof vest. He rolled his eyes.

“Peter, I’m not wearing that,” he said.

“Neal –“

“It’s not necessary. It’s overkill.”

“It’s not,” said Peter. “Friedrich – through Vega – has tried to kill you twice in the past week. I
wouldn’t put it past them one measly second to take another shot. Their best bet is while you’re en route from the hospital to my house. Put it on.”


Peter nodded grimly. “The car. And now the morphine. Seems like a sniper rifle would be easier. Less accident-like, but easier.”

Neal hesitated. “I still think it’s overkill,” he said. “He could just aim at my head. And we’ll be home before—“


Neal’s eyes widened and his lips parted. His pulse and his breathing sped up. He swallowed, then reached out and grabbed the vest. He put it on without another word, letting Peter help fasten it closed.

“You’re lucky I didn’t request a helmet with a face guard,” he murmured in Neal’s ear. Neal shivered. “But maybe next time.”

Next came a torso harness with a leash. Neal grimaced.

“Sorry,” said Peter. “This was part of the Court’s orders. I was able to keep you out of restraints while you recovered, but now that we’ll be moving publicly, we have to comply.”

“It’s okay,” said Neal. “I don’t love the leash, but I’m not actually that bothered by restraints.”

Peter raised his eyebrows.

“Look,” said Neal. “You think I’m this good at escaping them without spending a good deal of time in them?” He laughed at Peter’s expression.

“Good to know,” said Peter. “Wait until you see what I’m supposed to make you sleep in.”

Peter wiggled his eyebrows, and Neal laughed. He also felt a jolt of anticipation slither its way from his throat to his stomach. If Peter meant to restrain him, then get into bed beside him…

Best not to think about that until it became an actual problem.

Peter called to check on the wheelchair, and then turned back to Neal. He looked him up and down, his gaze lingering on where the leash trailed from the harness. After a moment, he crossed the room and grabbed up the end of the leash. He wound it around his hand, keeping Neal close.

Okay, maybe it’s already a problem, thought Neal wildly, feeling the harness tighten as the leash went taut.

“One more thing,” said Peter, his voice quiet. “When we get home, we’re going to have a talk.”

Neal swallowed. “Oh? About what? We’ve been talking all day.”

“About Friedrich,” said Peter. He sighed, and his voice softened. “Neal, it’s time you tell me what happened. I know this is difficult for you, but I can’t protect you if I don’t have all of the information. It’ll be okay. I promise.”
Neal’s mouth dropped open. He wasn’t ready to do that. He wasn’t ready to think about that, especially not if –

The door to the room opened, and an orderly pushed in a wheelchair. “Your chariot has arrived,” he said with a grin.

Peter winked at Neal and dropped the leash. “Great,” he said. “Let’s get you home.”

Neal tried not to panic, now that the idea of “home” was laced with more than one danger.

Chapter End Notes

If you've been faithfully patient, our slooooooow burn is about to heat up...
A treat for you all...a quick update! To say thank you for your patience.

**Warning: This chapter gets a little racy toward the end. If that's not your speed, you can skip ahead. If it is...I hope you enjoy the taste. You've been waiting so nicely.

**Chapter 28: Home**

*Thursday, July 1, 7:50PM*

Peter didn’t breathe easy until he was inside his own home with the door locked behind him. He felt reasonably safe here, only because the alarm had been engaged and an agent had been sitting on the house since the night before, watching for any strange activity. He knew that none of that meant someone couldn’t get in, but it made him feel better nonetheless.

It also made him feel better that Elizabeth was safely ensconced at her sister’s house upstate. He had had the – rather difficult – conversation with her that morning while Neal was using the bathroom.

“You want me to what?” she had asked, her voice turning incredulous.

“I want you to go see your sister. Just until this is all over,” he had said, trying his best to use a reasonable but not a patronizing tone.

She sighed. “Peter, we’ve talked about this. You can’t just send me away or lock me down every time you’re involved in a dangerous case. That’s ridiculous, and I refuse to live my life that way.”

“I know, El,” he had replied, rubbing a hand over his face. “And I agree with you, normally. This time is different.”

“Different how exactly?” she asked.

“Different because this time there have been actual dangerous attempts on Neal’s life, and different because Friedrich threatened you specifically.” He hated to tell her that, didn’t want her to worry, but she needed to know. She had a right to know.

She was quiet for a moment. “That just makes me want to stay and show that asshole I’m not easily intimidated,” she said.

He chuckled. “And that’s one of the many reasons I love and adore you. But El…normally I can keep you safe. Right now, my attentions are…split.”

“Between me and Neal, you mean.”

“Yes. And since he’s been the primary target, I have to focus on keeping him safe. I can’t be worried about you at the same time.”
She sighed, and he knew she was going to agree. “Okay,” she said. “I’ll go. On one condition.”

“Name it,” he said, thanking whatever higher power was listening that he had such an understanding, reasonable wife.

“You’re going to be alone with Neal during this time. Completely focused on him. Right?”

“Right,” said Peter, confused. “I can’t risk leaving him alone or with anyone else if I can help it, and…it’s probably safer if we work out of the house.”

“Think about what we’ve discussed, Peter. About the way you feel about him. This might be your opportunity to…show him.”

Peter racked his brain, trying to create an explanation for what she was saying. They had talked about how he cared about Neal. He had admitted it. She thought Neal fit into their lives seamlessly, that he was “filling in gaps” in Peter’s life.

How was he supposed to show Neal that?

“I’ll try,” he said, noncommittal.

“I guess that has to be good enough for me,” she said. “What I want here is for Neal to understand what he means to us, and that has to start with you.”

Now, standing in the empty house with Neal, he considered what she had meant. He thought he understood. Neal had a self-worth problem. He always seemed so surprised when people stuck their necks out for him, seemed uncomfortable with people going to too much trouble for him. Peter wanted him to realize that he was worth it.

Neal was gazing around the room, gone slightly dim in the summer evening light. The expression on his face was a mixture of relief and comfort, and that warmed Peter. He smiled.

“Come here,” he said. Neal turned and crossed to him without hesitation, and that warmed Peter even more.

He unlocked the torso harness and then helped Neal unfasten the bulletproof vest, tossing both items in the corner. He took a moment to let his hands skim over Neal’s chest and shoulders, as if brushing off the emotional weight that had come with each. It seemed to have the desired effect, because Neal hummed in satisfaction.

“Thanks,” he said. “It’s good to be home.” He looked around. “When I left yesterday morning I…wasn’t sure I’d get to see it again.”

Peter’s heart squeezed at that. The fact that Neal truly considered his house “home” after such a short time, and the fact that it had pained him to leave it before embarking on his attack on Hagan’s warehouse. It confirmed to Peter what Neal had said the day before: he hadn’t taken the step lightly and was aware of the risks.

“I don’t know about you, but I didn’t really eat much of that hospital dinner, and I’m still hungry. You want me to scrounge something up?”

Neal nodded enthusiastically. “Definitely,” he said. “I’ve been choking down that food for two days.”

Peter rolled his eyes. “You had all of three meals. El brought you that feast during the day
Neal frowned and looking around. “Speaking of, where is Elizabeth?”

Peter motioned for Neal to follow him into the kitchen. “She went to visit her sister upstate,” he said. “She’ll be back next week.” Or possibly later, if we lose the arbitration, he thought.

“How?” asked Neal. He opened the refrigerator and began poking around.

What to tell him? The truth, Peter decided. He needed Neal to understand the true gravity of the situation with Friedrich so he’d start talking. No reason to save his best cards for later.

“I thought she’d be safer there,” he explained. “I didn’t tell you this, because I didn’t want you to worry, but Friedrich made some not-so-veiled threats before the hearing yesterday.”

Neal froze. He turned, a package of chicken breast in his hand.

“What kind of threats?” he asked. “Against Elizabeth?”

Peter nodded. “And against you. Since the threats against you have proven to be more than mere words, I have to focus on you. That means—“

“That means you can’t protect your wife,” said Neal, his voice small. He set the chicken on the counter and then turned and leaned back against it. Running a hand through his hair, he met Peter’s eyes, his own filled with sorrow. “I’m sorry,” he whispered. “I’m truly fucking up your life.”

“Hey,” said Peter. Before he realized what he was doing, he had moved across the space to Neal’s side. He rested his hip against the counter right beside Neal and placed a hand on Neal’s shoulder. “You’re not fucking anything up, I promise you. This has happened before. A case gets dangerous, El is involved, I send her away. She doesn’t like it, but she does it. You know why? Because she knows that it’ll help me resolve the situation if I don’t have to worry about keeping her safe.”

“Sure. And this time, the reason you can’t focus on her is because you’ve got me like a lead weight dragging you down. What about your other cases, you haven’t been working on them at all, have you? You spent the last two days in the hospital, you’ve barely slept. For fuck’s sake, you’re risking everything. That’s on me. I’m doing that.”

During his speech, Neal hunched down further and further. Peter had never seen him quite so… small. Neal always seemed to take things in stride with a sheen of devil-may-care bravado, a larger-than-life confidence. Watching this Neal, one who seemed to want to fold in on himself and disappear, was chilling.

Peter slid his arms all the way around Neal, rested his chin on Neal’s shoulder. He moved his chin back and forth, in a soothing motion, the way he might if El was having a rough day. All he wanted at that moment was to make Neal realize that he was worth it. This was what El had wanted him to do. This was what Peter wanted, as well.

“Listen to me,” he said softly. “You’re not doing anything. This is all happening to you. Don’t take on Friedrich’s guilt, he deserves to carry it all.”

Neal let out a shaky laugh, but he relaxed slightly into Peter’s embrace, leaning towards him and tilting his head in his direction so that his temple rested against Peter’s forehead. “Jesus, you sound like a motivational speaker.”

“Maybe I missed my true calling,” said Peter. “Now, what should we do with this chicken? I think..."
there’s some mozzarella cheese in there, and bread crumbs in the pantry.”

“You know how to make chicken parmesan?” asked Neal, pulling away slightly and raising an eyebrow.

“Not at all. I’m sort of hoping you do.”

Neal laughed for real then. He stepped out of Peter’s arms and rubbed his hands together. “Move aside. I’m on it.”

Peter hopped onto one of the kitchen stools to watch Neal work. He worried that Neal should be resting, but decided to let him be. His smile was worth it.

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Thursday, July 1, 9:36PM

“What is that, exactly?” asked Neal, eyeing the contraption on the bed warily.

After they had both yawned through dinner – a delicious chicken parmesan, if he did say so himself – Peter had suggested they give up the fight and hit the sack. He had left Neal to get ready for bed on his own, and Neal had luxuriated in being able to take a shower and brush his teeth and wear Peter’s giant soft pajama pants that had been freshly washed. By Elizabeth, no doubt.

Neal hadn’t been certain what was going to happen once it was time to actually go to bed. His nerves had started to jump all over the place, making his skin feel itchy and his stomach clench at the remains of dinner. Would Peter stay with him after tying him up in whatever the Court had determined was sufficient to keep him in place? Would he react to being restrained the way Friedrich had wanted him to? Would he have nightmares again?

Peter sighed. “It’s an arm binder,” he said. “It’s supposed to—“

“Let me guess. Bind my arms?” Neal reached for it and touched the leather hesitantly. There were two sleeves that had no openings for hands, connected by a set of complicated-looking straps and locks. He had said he didn’t mind restraints that much, and he wasn’t kidding. Under the right circumstances, they could be enjoyable, at least before his time with Friedrich. But this looked evil. Maybe not as evil as the Justice Facility restraints, and yet…

“You don’t have to wear it,” said Peter. “It was delivered along with the rest of the equipment.”

Neal considered this. “The Court ordered it, right?”

Peter nodded. “For sleep only,” he said. “At least until you can wear your GPS collar again, and then we revisit the order. But I’m not going to make you. You’ve got the old ankle monitor on, and… I don’t think you’re going anywhere. Am I wrong?”

Neal shook his left leg, feeling the ankle monitor that was fastened there. It had been part of the compromise with the Court. Because he couldn’t wear the GPS collar until the shock burns healed, in exchange for not being either locked up or in full restraints at all times, Margaret Beechwood had convinced the judge to authorize an ankle monitor like they used for white collar criminals under house arrest. It was the “lite” version of the GPS collar. No shocks involved, just location monitoring. Neal didn’t think he could get it off, but he wasn’t planning to try, in any event.

“You’re not wrong,” said Neal. “I’m not going anywhere. I think I sort of proved that last night.”
“Good enough for me.” Peter took the arm binder and tossed it into the corner.

“We’d be violating the Court order,” said Neal.

Peter shrugged. “I’m not concerned.”

They stared at each other for a long minute. Did Neal want to wear it? No, not really. Not in the way it was intended, to keep him from doing something he wasn’t planning to do. But part of him was a little curious. He had never tried to get out of an arm binder before. He wondered what it would feel like. He wondered if he could control his reactions. He didn’t like not knowing.

Finally, Neal sighed. He went over to where the thing had landed and picked it up, holding it out to Peter.

“I am,” said Neal. “I’m causing enough problems. This isn’t a big deal, let’s just follow the damn order.” When Peter started to protest, Neal shook his head. “Look, by this this time next week, with any luck, you’ll be the one making up the rules.”

Peter took the restraint. “Are you sure?” he asked. “This is your call, Neal. I am fine with saying ‘fuck you’ to the judge on this. No one will know unless you run, and you’re not going to do that.”

“I’m sure,” said Neal. “Just…put it on already before I change my mind.”

Peter nodded. “If you do change your mind, though, just tell me. I’ll take it off. You don’t have to prove anything, here.”

“How does it work?” asked Neal.

Peter turned it over, frowning. “I think there’s a couple of ways to do it,” he said. He looked Neal over a moment. “Come here.”

Neal stepped closer, standing with his arms at his sides, trying to be as calm as possible. He had asked for this, and it was Peter. He could trust Peter. If Peter said he could take it off, he could take it off.

Peter took Neal’s arm and slid his hand down to Neal’s wrist, the action comforting. Neal relaxed further at the touch, and when Peter slid his arm into the first sleeve, pulling it up and over his elbow, he smiled.


“Good.” Peter fastened the short straps that went around his wrist and below his elbow, securing the sleeve on his arm. He then did the other arm in the same fashion, once again stroking from shoulder to wrist before putting the sleeve on.

Neal’s arms were still free, even encased within the sleeves, so he moved them around, stretching out his shoulders in anticipation of losing that movement. He wiggled his hands around inside the leather. It wasn’t tight, but there wasn’t much give. He wouldn’t be able to use his fingers at all.

“Ready?” asked Peter.

Neal nodded. “Ready,” he said.

Peter pulled both arms in front of his body, crossing them with his hands on opposite shoulders. Then he began pulling the large straps around. He paused here and there to run a comforting hand...
over Neal’s shoulder or chest, wrapping and fastening, until –

“There,” said Peter. “That should do it.” He stepped back to look over his handiwork.

Neal pulled at his arms. They didn’t budge at all. He couldn’t raise his elbows or even really move his hands anymore. He felt a bit of panic and claustrophobia rise up. Maybe this was a mistake. Maybe he should tell Peter he wanted out.

He raised his eyes to Peter, ready to cry uncle, and stopped.

Peter was staring at him, with an odd expression on his face. His eyes were dark, his pupils wide, and his mouth was open slightly. As Neal watched, his tongue darted out and wet his lips.

Neal gasped, and looked away. All thoughts of removing the arm binder fled. With Peter looking at him like that, he wanted to stay in it forever. The thoughts he had been entertaining about Peter in private suddenly rushed forward, and he found himself wondering if Peter was attracted to him in the same way he was attracted to Peter.

He could feel himself starting to stir, whether from the restraints or from the way Peter was looking at him, he wasn’t sure. He took a deep breath, and then another.

“Let’s go to bed,” he said, desperately. He was half hard already, but if he could get under the covers he could avoid Peter’s scrutiny, and maybe make it through the night in one piece.

Speaking seemed to break the spell. Peter shook his head slightly, and then nodded. He crossed to the bed and pulled the covers back so that Neal could slide in. Neal immediately turned on his side, away from Peter.

When Peter curled around Neal’s back and snaked an arm around to rest on Neal’s bound arms, he melted backwards into Peter’s heat. It felt like it had been ages since he had gotten to sleep in Peter’s arms, but it had only been day and a half. One night.

If Neal wanted to, he could worry about how attached he was getting. He didn’t want to.

“Neal,” said Peter, his breath tickling Neal’s ear.

“Yeah?”

“We still need to talk about Friedrich.”

Neal tensed, and Peter could clearly feel it, because he began to run his hand up and down Neal’s arms.

“I know you don’t want to,” said Peter. “And I understand. I wouldn’t push this if it wasn’t important.”

“I know,” said Neal.

“Would it help if I told you what I was thinking? Why I think it’s so important?”

Neal wanted to turn, wrap his arms around Peter. The man was being so damned gentle. He’d been that way from the very first, and it was starting to break Neal down. He had always been “Neal Caffrey” up against “Peter Burke.” “Neal Caffrey” was confident, talented, charming, brilliant. “Peter Burke” was determined, ruthless, and also brilliant. But how was he supposed to keep being “Neal Caffrey” in front of this Peter Burke, the one who ministered to his injuries and held him
close and paid attention to his feelings?

He was almost glad for the restraints, because it meant he couldn’t give in to his instincts. Instead, he just said, “Yes.”

“Vega has come after you twice, now. I’ve got people working on a link between Vega and Friedrich. If we can find one, and prove that Friedrich is behind these attempts, we turn our decent chance at arbitration into an almost sure thing.”

Neal nodded. He knew that ESIA had eroded prisoners’ rights to the point where they almost weren’t considered human, but owners did not yet have carte blanche with their inmates’ lives. It was a loophole, sort of. Owners could do anything they wanted with their inmates except kill them themselves. It was why Friedrich hadn’t outright done the job himself in the first place, and had turned him over to Justice. If they could show that Friedrich to made these attempts, it would be easier to persuade the arbiter that he shouldn’t get his desired result.

“The thing is,” Peter continued, “we don’t have a lot of time, and I’m not confident we can find that link directly. So the next best thing would be to uncover Friedrich’s motives. If we can do that, we might be able to make the case circumstantially.”

“Makes sense,” said Neal.

“Which is why I need to ask…Neal, why the hell does Friedrich want you dead so badly?” Peter’s voice shook on the last question, and the emotion in his words stalled Neal’s own anxiety for a moment.

He tried to figure out the best course forward. How much could he tell Peter without destroying himself in the process? Without ruining Peter’s opinion of him, changing the way Peter looked at him? What could he leave out and still have the story make sense?

Neal’s silence stretched on and on. Finally, Peter squeezed him. “You still awake?”

“I’m awake,” whispered Neal. “Peter…I’m trying. I swear to you I’m trying to tell you. I just can’t seem to make the words happen.”

Peter took a deep breath, and when he exhaled, it ruffled the hair on Neal’s neck. Neal shivered. Peter must have felt it, because he tightened his arm.

“Oh okay,” said Peter. “Why don’t we go to sleep. Can you promise me to try again in the morning? Maybe in the daylight it’ll be easier.”

Neal nearly cried in relief. He had a reprieve. A short one, but a reprieve nonetheless. He’d take whatever he could get.

“I promise,” he said. “I’ll tell you. In the morning.”

He would, he realized. He had to. Even if it was a partial story, he’d figure out how to reveal enough but not the worst parts about himself. He was “Neal Caffrey.” He could figure this out, and Peter would still see him the same way.

“Thank you,” said Peter.

Neal felt Peter’s nose in his hair, and he shivered again.

“Cold?” asked Peter. “Should I get another blanket?”
“No, I’m okay,” said Neal.

Peter hummed. He shifted his hips closer and drew his knees up, forcing Neal’s up as well. Neal was now completely surrounded by Peter. This was the closest they had ever been.

“Better?” he asked.

Neal swallowed. “Yeah.”

It was going to be a long night.

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\* Friday, July 2, 7:27AM \*

Peter woke up in the exact same position in which he had fallen asleep, which only happened if he had been truly exhausted.

Neal, however, had shifted. Instead of facing away from Peter, he had turned around and was now burrowed into Peter’s chest. Peter smiled down at him. The fact that the great Neal Caffrey was snuggling with the FBI agent who took him down…well, it was something that would have been hard to believe if he didn’t see it for himself.

And yet, it wasn’t really so much of a surprise, Peter thought. He had analyzed Neal thoroughly while they were playing their game of cat and mouse, and he knew that underneath the confident exterior was a man who was driven by his emotions. It was how he had caught Neal, after all, baiting his heart. He had just never thought that he’d be the recipient of those emotions.

It was a heady thing, knowing that Neal put so much faith in him and felt so safe with him. Even Elizabeth, whom Peter knew was his biggest fan, didn’t bring out his need to protect so fiercely. Sure, he took his job as protector of his wife seriously, but with Neal…

…Neal was letting his walls down at such a furious pace that Peter was compelled to shelter him. That was what it was, he decided. Neal had no choice but to be vulnerable, and he was dealing with it, but he needed Peter at the moment in a way El never really did. Peter was more than happy to give him whatever he needed.

Maybe that was what El had been talking about the other night. Neal filled gaps because Peter needed to be needed, more than El needed him. That didn’t mean he was unhappy, just that there was a part of him that went unfulfilled. He was able to ignore it, but now that Neal had awakened it, it was going to be hard to push back down.

If things went his way at the hearing, maybe he wouldn’t have to. Not for ten long years, anyway. Neal would be his to protect until the Contract ran out. For the first time, Peter allowed himself to admit the truth: he liked the idea, beyond just saving Neal’s life. He wanted to Neal to be his.

Peter let his fingers run lightly up and down Neal’s spine as he thought. He hated to wake him, but he’d like to at least get him out of the damned restraints.

After a few minutes, Neal stirred. He pressed his nose into Peter’s chest and let out an unhappy grunt. Peter laughed softly, his torso vibrating, which caused Neal to huff and pull back slightly. He blinked up at Peter blearily, wiggling around until he remembered he couldn’t move his arms. His tongue shot out to the corner of his mouth, and he grimaced.

“I’m drooling,” he said, disgust heavy in his voice. “You let me drool all over your shirt.”
Peter laughed again. “I don’t mind,” he said, and was surprised that it was true. The small damp circle under his left pec chilled slightly now that it was exposed to air, and for some reason it made him grin.

“What are you so happy about,” griped Neal. “My nose itches.” He hesitated a second, then dove forward towards Peter’s chest again, dragging his nose back and forth across the fabric of Peter’s shirt.

Peter grasped Neal’s shoulder and pushed him back, Neal’s head straining towards him.

“Hold still,” said Peter. He reached out a hand, and Neal stopped moving, watching it warily. Peter slowly advanced his hand towards Neal, then lightly scratched his nose. “Okay?”

Neal snorted. “You like this,” he accused. “You like seeing me all trussed up and helpless.”

Peter’s breath caught, and the memory of that moment last night, when he had just gotten Neal into the restraint, came flooding back. He had been floored for a second at the feelings that were stirring in him at the sight.

He shoved the memory back down where it belonged. A strange, inexplicable moment, that was all that was.

Even though Peter had been just thinking he liked the way Neal Needed him…

Neal interrupted his thoughts be speaking again.

“Can I get out of this?” he asked, pulling at the restraint.

Peter immediately pushed himself upright, pulling Neal with him. He busied himself with the fasteners until Neal’s sleeves were free, then undid them one at a time, sliding them off of Neal’s arms.

Neal stretched out his arms one at a time then reached over his head and arched his back. He let out a groan.

“Sore?” asked Peter.

“You have no idea,” said Neal, gasping as he clasped his hands behind his back and stretched upwards.

“Here, lie back down,” said Peter. “On your stomach.”

Neal looked at him in question, and Peter just smiled, took him by the shoulder and pushed him into position, shoving the pillow up so that Neal’s forehead could rest on it and his face was free. He pulled Neal’s arms down by his sides, and knelt by Neal’s hip. He smiled at how pliant Neal was, letting him manhandle him this way.

Peter placed his hands on Neal’s back and began to press down with his fingers, gently at first and then with increased pressure. Neal moaned as Peter found the tight cords of muscle and slowly worked them loose. His worked his way outward from Neal’s spine to his shoulders, and the down the spine to his lower back. Eventually, he was digging his fingers into the spot where Neal’s shoulder met his neck, and Neal sighed.

“This okay?” asked Peter. “Feeling better?”
Neal just hummed a response, sinking further into the mattress as his muscles let go.

Peter entered a state of contentment. Giving the massage was as soothing to him as receiving it was to Neal, it would seem. The rhythmic push and pull of the warm muscles beneath his fingers, the way Neal’s body just gave in to the demands of his hands...Peter felt as though a fog had settled around them both, sleepy and comfortable and just existing.

After a while, Peter stopped, rubbing across Neal’s shoulders in soothing circles. Without thinking, he leaned forward and placed a kiss on the back of Neal’s neck.

He froze.

“Mmm,” said Neal, in almost a whimper. “Don’t stop.”

Carefully, Peter began his rubbing motion again. “Like that?” he asked, cursing silently at how breathy his voice sounded.

“The other thing too,” murmured Neal.

_The other thing too._

Peter felt his heartbeat speed up. Did Neal mean he wanted Peter to kiss his neck again? Could he do that? It had been a moment of...something. Something completely unguarded. He licked his lips.

Slowly, so slowly he was barely moving, he bent down again. He let his lips touch Neal’s neck, his nose buried in Neal’s hair.

Neal sighed.

Peter kissed him again, then moved down his spine, leaving kisses a couple of inches apart on his way down. When he reached the hem of Neal’s t-shirt, he hesitated a mere moment before giving in to temptation. He slid his fingers up underneath, skimming over the skin on Neal’s lower back, just above the waistband of his pants,

After each kiss, Neal let out a little sigh or whimper, and when Peter’s fingers touched his skin, he inhaled a shaky breath. The noises Neal was making were...

Peter shot straight up and yanked his hands back. What was he doing?

He cleared his throat. “I think it’s time to get up,” he said, scrambling backwards off of the bed. “Meet you in the kitchen for breakfast?”

He had grabbed his cell phone and was out of the room without waiting for an answer.

Once in his bathroom, Peter braced his hands on the counter and hung his head. What had just happened? He felt like he had been another person, or drifting in a dream state, rather than reality. He had kissed Neal.

And Neal had...

Peter took one deep breath after another. His mind jumped back to his earlier thoughts. He was giving Neal what Neal needed. Hadn’t he just been admitting that that was something Peter needed as well, to be there for Neal? Hadn’t he just decided he was comfortable with Neal filling that space in his life?
But this was different this was…

Peter flashed back to the night before, to the moment he had fastened the arm binder and stepped back to get a good look. He remembered that fierce jolt of…lust…he had felt. He had tried to ignore it, but maybe it couldn’t be ignored.

He should face it, then. He was Peter Burke, he didn’t need to avoid a problem. He would solve the problem, that’s what he did. He’d let himself think about it, get it out of his system so it wasn’t lurking in the background, waiting to take him by surprise. Then he could dismiss it.

He closed his eyes, imagining. He imagined Neal stretched out on the bed, waiting for him. He’d stand at the foot of the bed, and Neal would be gazing at him through lowered lashes, a faint smile on his lips. He’d crawl up the miles of Neal’s lanky frame, settle his weight on top for a moment before pushing up onto his arms. He’d—

-- oh --

press his hips down, feeling Neal’s length hardening underneath him. Neal would sigh, just like he had during the massage, and…

Nope. This wasn’t going to work. There was no way that fantasizing about his convict would do anything but give him an erection that he’d have to take care of. Peter was kidding himself if he thought a simple fantasy would get Neal out of his system, now that he had taken root.

It wouldn’t be the first time Peter was attracted to a man. It would just be the first time in a long time. And it would be the first time he had felt it this strongly.

Maybe he didn’t just want Neal to be his to take care of. Maybe he wanted more.

Fuck.

He needed to call Elizabeth.
Chapter Summary

Neal tries to figure out what happened, what is happening, and how to move forward, but it's not a smooth road.

Chapter Notes

I'm here, I'm here.

It's that time of year (one of those times of year) when things are crazier than usual, and I appreciate your patience.

Don't hesitate to poke at me in the comments for an update, it actually helps me stop working and do something fun.

Chapter 29: Friction, Part One

Friday, July 2, 8:42AM

Neal lay on his bed in the guest room, afraid to move. All the work Peter had done to loosen his muscles was erased as he tensed from neck to toe.

He heard a door slam down the hall, and then silence.

What had just happened?

That massage…he screwed his eyes shut, trying to recapture that feeling.

When Peter had told him to lie face down, he had been…confused. It was no wonder, really. Deciding to don the restraints the night before and seeing the glimmer of unexpected desire on Peter’s face had thrown everything into chaos, at least in Neal’s not-so-stable head. Falling asleep with Peter wrapped around him but unable to move had been both comforting and arousing. Waking up in a completely vulnerable position – restrained, drooling, having practically tried to dig a hole in Peter’s chest to climb inside – had paradoxically made Neal feel more safe and cared for than he could remember feeling in a long while.

Then Peter hadn’t waited for him to comply, had just…moved him where he wanted him. Neal, still feeling dazed from the way he had felt upon waking up, had just let Peter do what he wanted. When Peter’s hands began to press into his stiff muscles, he had to bite down hard on his lip and shove his face into the pillow to avoid embarrassing himself. Even so, he knew he hadn’t been able to contain the sounds he was making.

It felt so right, having Peter’s hands on him, and even though he knew it was just Peter being Peter, and taking care of him, he let himself enjoy it.
Then Peter kissed his neck. It made Neal relax even more, a gesture of affection that he needed in that moment. When Peter drew back, Neal had protested. He wanted those hands to keep moving on him, keep kneading at his muscles.

Peter had misunderstood, however, instead kissing him again. There was a different tone to it. It was less affection, and more…exploration. Neal hadn’t been able to believe it, wasn’t sure how to react. He was almost afraid to react in any way, not able to believe that something he had been fantasizing about was actually happening.

When Peter’s fingers wandered up under his shirt, he had nearly lost it, seconds away from flipping over and grabbing fistfuls of Peter’s hair, yanking those lips onto his mouth.

And then, Peter had bolted from the room. It seemed he couldn’t get away fast enough.

Shit.

Neal heard the shower turn on, and forced himself to sit up. He had a few minutes, at least, while Peter was occupied, to figure out how to proceed. He headed down to the kitchen, thinking that maybe if he acted like everything was normal, Peter would take his cue, and everything would actually be normal.

But was that what Neal wanted?

He turned on the oven and assembled ingredients for a frittata, finding the movement of chopping vegetables soothing as he tried to make sense of his scattered thoughts.

What did he want, exactly? On the one hand, what he wanted most was to be free. Right? He wanted to be out from under the weight of a prison contract, without law enforcement breathing down his neck, so he could go about living his life.

If he was free, what would that life look like? Kate, of course. It would include Kate. He’d go after her, find her, remind her how much they loved each other. They could live happily ever after.

Doing what, Neal?

He began to crack eggs into a bowl, shaking his head. That question was far too complicated to think about just yet, because being truly free wasn’t an option on the table. He could enlist Mozzie’s help and run, sure, but he had already decided he wasn’t going to do that. Yet.

So. If he couldn’t be free, what was the next best choice?

That was easy. He wanted to serve out his contract with Peter. It was the clear choice, especially when presented with other options, but…it was also a good choice on its own.

He liked Peter, he always had. He enjoyed spending time with the man, matching wits, figuring out what made him tick, seeing whether he could be fooled. Peter was an endless source of amusement, in more ways than one. He liked Peter, and he liked being around him.

Neal listened up the stairs a moment; he could still hear the shower. He returned to the kitchen, drizzled olive oil onto the cast iron skillet, and began to sauté the vegetables.

Now, in terms of other feelings…he had acknowledged that he was attracted to Peter. He had never thought that Peter could be attracted to him in return, or be interested in acting on it, so it had just been Neal’s problem to deal with and conceal. But now it seemed that there was maybe some reciprocal interest. And that made things complicated.
On top of that, there was the realization that maybe he liked the idea of belonging to Peter in a way that was a little less practical and a little more…instinctive. He was finding that he didn’t mind Peter having control of his fate as much as he thought he would, and that was true on the large scale as well as the small one. He trusted Peter to look out for him, and he liked it when Peter did. Liked it in an emotional sense, as well as a physical sense.

But all of that meant…what, exactly? Because at the end of the day, whether Peter was interested in Neal that way or not, Peter was still married. Happily married, to an incredible person who did not deserve to have Neal making moves on her husband behind her back. Speaking of which, he owed Elizabeth an entirely separate apology, and there was no time like the present to make it.

He slid the pan into the oven to bake, and picked up his cell phone, the one Peter had given him. The phone rang twice before she picked up.

“Neal?” asked Elizabeth. “Is everything okay? Are you okay?”

He smiled at the sound of her voice, immediately feeling calmer and more focused, and eternally grateful to have met her.

“We’re fine. Elizabeth, I’m so sorry,” he said.

“Sorry about what?” she asked.

“That you had to flee your own home. I never wanted to cause you any problems, and I feel terrible that my mess is screwing up your life. I swear, once this is all over, I’ll make it up to you.”

“Oh, sweetie, don’t worry about me,” she said. He could tell, from the sound of her voice, that she was smiling, and it made him relax. “Listen, when Peter and I decided to do this, and we knew from the start what that might mean.”

“I bet you never expected to be in personal danger.”

“I’ve been in personal danger due to Peter’s job more times than I care to count,” she said dryly. “This is but one more instance in the long and winding road of our life. Seriously, Neal, do not worry about this. I left not because I was scared, but because Peter was worried about me. When he worries about me, he loses focus, and I wanted him to focus on you and you alone right now.”

He sighed. “I appreciate that,” he said.

“What did Peter say when you talked to him about this?” she asked.

“The same thing you said. But with less…charm.”

She laughed. “Good. Please believe it, then. Peter and I are happy to have you with us. We both like having you around, and are willing to fight for it. You fit with us. You must feel it, too.”

He hesitated, moisture pricking at his eyes, struggling with what to say next. All he could think about was that he had seriously been contemplating seducing her husband, and here she was being amazing and wonderful.

She was quiet for a minute, but when he didn’t volunteer anything else, she asked quietly, “Neal, has he figured it out yet?”

“Figured what out?”
“How you feel about him? Don’t try to deny it, Neal, I’ve seen the way you look at him. The way you are with him.”

Neal felt the color rise to his cheeks. Shit, she could read his mind. Either that, or he had completely lost the ability to con anyone.

“I don’t know if he knows,” Neal said, his voice shaking. “I barely know myself. Shit, Elizabeth, I’m sorry. You don’t have anything to worry about. It’s just me being all fucked up because of all the stuff that’s been happening. I’ll just—”

“Neal, stop,” said Elizabeth, her voice calm. “I’m not worried, and you don’t have to be sorry. Stop apologizing for things you can’t control.”

“I can control what I do,” he said firmly. “And I promise you that I won’t act on it.”

“You damn well better,” she said.

What?

“I don’t understand,” said Neal. He was gripping the edge of the counter to stay upright, his fingers going white where they pressed into the granite.

“Neal, I love my husband. Unconditionally. I want to give him whatever he needs to be happy, whether that means leaving town or letting him get what he needs from someone else.”

He swallowed thickly. “Does that mean you two have…an open marriage?”

“No, definitely not,” she said. “I would never be okay with him – with either of us – going out and having relationships with random people.”

“Then…” Neal found himself incredibly confused. “I’m sorry, then I really don’t understand what you’re saying.”

“You’re not a random person, Neal. You’ve been a significant part of our lives for a while now. I’ve known how he’s felt about you for years, and I made my peace with that long ago.”

“How he’s felt about me?” Neal was having trouble breathing. What could Elizabeth mean?

“He may not know it, or admit it, but I see it. He looks at you the same way you look at him, when you think the other is not watching. Sweetie, he’s crazy about you.”

Neal let out a breath. Crap. “I didn’t…I didn’t realize. I thought it was just me. Are you sure?”

“I’m positive. I’ve been watching him dance around this for years, and this past week has been insane for him. If he hasn’t figured it out yet, he will. He’s a little slow about these things sometimes.”

They were both quiet for a minute. Neal heard the shower turn off upstairs.

“I don’t know how to…or even if I could…” he trailed off. “Jesus. This is not a conversation I ever thought I’d be having.”

She laughed softly. “You remember that story I told you and Mozzie the other day? About how Peter and I met?”

“Yeah.”
“Do you remember what I did?”

Neal smiled at the image brought forth. “You found out he was stalking you and held up a sign saying ‘I like Italian.’”

“Exactly. Peter’s not going to make a move. Not unless he’s absolutely certain it’s the right action.” She sighed. “So, if this is something you want, you can’t rely on him to lead the way.”

Neal heard movement upstairs. Peter was moving around. He knew he didn’t have much time. “Elizabeth,” he said, swallowing his mortification as best he could, “just to make absolutely sure I’m not misreading this entire conversation, are you telling me that you’re fine with it if I…seduce your husband?”

“Neal, nothing would make me happier. You two are torturing yourselves. Just…”

Neal waited, and when she didn’t go on, he asked, “Just what?”

“Just be careful with him, okay? Peter tends to move forward and go all in very fast, and I don’t want him to get hurt. Think about what you want and be clear about the boundaries, if you have them. I know you still care about Kate.”

He nodded. He didn’t know what he wanted from Peter, exactly. He didn’t know what those boundaries might be. Frankly, the idea that he would have to be careful with Peter Burke was almost ridiculous. But he thought he understood what Elizabeth was asking of him.

“I don’t take this lightly, Elizabeth,” Neal said. “I don’t want him hurt anymore than you do.”

“I know, sweetie,” she said.

“Listen, I better go. Thank you. This was…”

“Oh, we’re never going to have a normal relationship, Neal. Best get used to that now. Take care of yourself, and our man.”

Our man. Neal felt a bloom of something bright take root in his chest. He barely even knew how to respond, so he just said, “You take care, too. Check in, okay?”

“I will. Bye, Neal.”

He hung up just as Peter descended the stairs. He was moving slowly, almost tentatively. When he rounded the corner and saw Neal leaning up against the counter, the relief in his eyes was apparent.

Neal felt the little bright spot in his chest deflate. Peter didn’t trust him, not completely. After everything they had been through the past week, after Neal had had a real actual opportunity to run and didn’t…Peter still didn’t trust him. How was it possible he could trust Peter so completely and Peter couldn’t give him just a little bit of credit?

“Making breakfast?” Peter asked.

Neal nodded and eyed him. “You were worried I ran again, weren’t you?” he asked quietly.

Peter shook his head. “No, not worried. I’m just…glad you’re still here.”

“Where am I going to go?” asked Neal. He tried to think of something to say to get back on track. “I told you, I’m not going anywhere.”
“At the moment,” said Peter.

“Fine. At the moment.” Neal gritted his teeth and turned away from Peter, bending down to peek into the oven and check on the frittata.

“Don’t be mad at me,” said Peter, with a sigh. “Don’t be mad at me for being relieved to see you standing in my kitchen. That’s all that was. I was happy you were here.”

“The only reason to be happy I’m here is because you thought there was a chance I might not be.” Neal straightened up and pushed his hair out of his face. He really needed to get it cut. “What is it going to take to get you to trust me?”

Peter frowned. “I do trust you.”

“Not really. Not really, you don’t. In the past week, I’ve done nothing – nothing – to give you a reason to doubt my intentions. I’ve been honest with you—”

“You met up with Mozzie and got a burner phone,” said Peter. “You went digging around for information about Kate in more ways than one even after I told you I’d help you with that. You went off on your own and nearly got yourself killed – twice – without thinking about the consequences.”

“I thought about the consequences,” said Neal. “We already went over that, I’m not defending myself again. Vega trying to kill me in the hospital was not my fault. It happened because I didn’t run, not because of something I did. You knew about Mozzie, and I haven’t done a single thing regarding Kate behind your back since I asked for your help.”

“You searched online.”

“Before I asked you for help! You can’t throw that—” Neal stopped, took a deep breath. What was happening? He had just been thinking about how he was going to take Elizabeth’s advice and try to continue what Peter had started that morning, and instead they were yelling at each other while the frittata was burning.

“Neal...”

Neal held up a hand. He turned away and shut off the oven, then donned mitts and pulled the frittata out. When he turned back to Peter, he had gathered himself.

“Look, Peter. This arrangement between us works in exactly one way. You have to understand that, at the end of the day, you have all the power here, and I am well aware of that, no matter how much I push against the boundaries. This isn’t like when we were tracking each other around the world. This isn’t like when I was sending you gifts from the prison camp. I have exactly one reasonable option here that doesn’t result in the end for me. One.”

As Neal spoke, Peter’s face fell inch by inch. He looked so distraught that Neal couldn’t help himself. He crossed the kitchen until he was standing right in front of the man, and he gave a weak smile.

“But that doesn’t mean that I don’t have a choice in how I feel about it. I’m here because I want to be here. I want you to buy my Contract. Not just because it’s the only option that’s going to save my life, but because it’s a good option. It’s a great option. This is a win for me.”

Peter didn’t say anything, but he got that little wrinkle between his eyebrows, like he was confused. Neal didn’t know exactly where he was headed with this speech, but he had one more thing he felt
had to be said.

“So even though you’ve got all the power, I…kind of…it’s working for me. Aren’t you curious about why it’s so easy for me to just let you do whatever you want? I’m the one who offered to be restrained last night, because I knew that you’d take care of me. I like that. I like knowing that you’ll be there for me.”

Peter was staring at him, eyes wide. Neal suddenly felt like it was all too much, like there was too much weight to what they were talking about. He needed to step back.

So he did. He took several steps back, towards the kitchen door.

“Neal—“ Peter began, but Neal backed further away.

“Have breakfast,” he said. “I’m going to take a shower. When I come down…” he sighed. “You wanted me to talk to you about Friedrich. I can’t do that right now, but maybe when I come back down, we can try.”

Peter watched him a moment, then nodded. “I’ll save you some eggs,” he said.

Neal smiled. “Thanks.”

Then he practically ran up the stairs.

How the hell was he supposed to move forward with Peter when he couldn’t figure out where they were?
Chapter Summary

Peter examines the evidence.

Chapter Notes

Another redux chapter for you... here's a little insight into what was going on in Peter's head while Neal was chatting with El and getting offended by Peter's relief.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 30: Friction, Part Two

Friday, July 2, 8:45AM

Peter’s finger hovered over El’s name in his recent call list. He wanted to call her immediately and talk this through. She was always his first stop when he was dealing with something difficult, especially when that difficult something involved emotions. She had a better handle on all of that than he ever could.

But what, exactly, was he supposed to say?

Hi, El. I miss you, too. Listen, I think I might be the slightest bit attracted to our convict. What do you think I should do about that?

No. Definitely, no. And it wasn’t even accurate.

Hi El. How’s your sister? The family? Satchmo? Why am I calling? Well, funny thing. Neal asked me to put him in these court-ordered restraints last night, and I immediately wanted to bend him over the side of the bed and fuck him into next week. Then this morning, I kissed his neck and played with the skin on his lower back, and I wanted to keep doing it. What’s that about, do you think?

Right. Because that was what your wife of ten years wanted to hear from you.

El! I wish you were here. You know how I get when there are feelings involved, and I could use your advice. I realized this morning that I may feel more for Neal than just the need to protect him, and...

He didn’t even know how to finish that last one. And what? And…I was wondering how you’d feel if I acted on that? You wouldn’t feel betrayed, would you?

With a frustrated sigh, Peter set his phone down on the counter. Maybe he’d feel better after a shower, more sane. He turned the water as hot as he could stand and stepped under the cascade, letting the heat wash over him.
So maybe he couldn’t call El, not yet. Not until he knew exactly what he was dealing with, here. It was time to do what he did best: look at the evidence and draw conclusions.

Evidence: It was the highlight of Peter’s two-months – well, maybe that was an exaggeration, but it was at least a highlight – when he had been scheduled to call the prison camp to check on Neal. Even though he didn’t actually see or talk to Neal, he anticipated the call for days before, and felt happier when he had confirmed Neal’s continued status.

Evidence: Peter couldn’t help but smile anytime he received a cheeky card or gift from Neal, whether when he was in pursuit of the kid or once Neal was in prison.

Evidence: Peter found Neal fascinating, had since almost the moment he started chasing the forger they had nicknamed “James Bonds.” He liked watching him think. He thought Neal was charming, and funny, and challenging, and had a good heart – underneath all his disregard for the technicalities of the law and pesky notions like rightful ownership and truth.

Conclusion: Peter liked Neal. He liked being around him. Neal made his life… better, somehow, just by existing in it.

Okay. That was a start. It also wasn’t a new revelation, except that Peter hadn’t really acknowledged it so starkly before. Sure, he knew he enjoyed Neal and was amused by him, but… Neal was important to him. It made him feel good to have Neal nearby.

Peter began to wash his hair, and shifted over to a new stack of evidence.

Evidence: Peter had experienced extraordinary heart-stopping fear exactly seven times in his life. Once was when he thought El might be in danger from a case and couldn’t reach her. Twice were moments in the field where Peter was seriously afraid he was about to be shot. Four times were in the past week and a half, and they all had to do with Neal. When Peter learned that Neal was in danger of the death penalty, when he was nearly hit by that car, when he ran off to take down Hagan, and when Vega dosed him with morphine. In each and every one of those situations, Peter had had to grapple with the idea that Neal might be gone, that he might lose Neal from his life, and… that was a life Peter didn’t want to imagine.

Evidence: Each time he found Neal alive, and okay – or, mostly okay – Peter’s gratitude made him want to weep. The wave of emotions was not a common sensation for Peter, that overwhelming, lightheaded, knee-shaking release from being sure your world was about to be destroyed. He didn’t love that, but he couldn’t deny it, either.

Conclusion: He cared about Neal. A lot. At least to the point of dear friendship, maybe more than that. Neal meant something to Peter, and Peter was willing to do just about anything to make sure he was all right.

Peter rinsed the shampoo out of his hair and grabbed the soap. This wasn’t news, either. He knew he cared about Neal. He and El had talked about it. But it was a valid conclusion, so it was worth acknowledging, even if it wasn’t earth-shattering.

So far, Peter liked Neal, and he cared about him, strongly. Next?

Evidence: When Neal was vulnerable, and needed Peter, Peter immediately responded by offering his care and protection. His first instinct when Neal was hurting, or in danger, or struggling, was to step in and make things better, safer. He felt a warmth radiate from his chest down to his stomach and below whenever Neal gave him that… look. The one that said he trusted Peter and wanted Peter to be there for him.
Conclusion: Peter liked to be a protector, and playing that role for Neal, in combination with the fact that he cared about Neal, made him feel…full. Full of everything, satisfied, content…happy.

He had realized that much that morning. By needing Peter, Neal gave Peter something that he hadn’t even realized that he needed. Thinking about that, of course, led Peter to the next bucket of evidence.

Evidence: Peter had noticed…without really allowing himself to notice…that he seemed to be willing to touch Neal. Often. He was constantly reaching out, putting hands on his back, his chest, ruffling his hair. It seemed natural. Peter couldn’t seem to help it, those points of contact were like some kind of drug. Neal seemed to like that, as well, taking comfort from them as much as Peter took comfort from giving them.

Evidence: For the past week and a half, Peter had been sleeping with Neal in his arms. That had been a little odd at first, but had quickly become natural as well. More than natural. He craved it. When Neal was in the hospital, Peter had longed to have him safe in bed beside him. He had missed being with El, but, oddly…not as much as he would have expected.

Evidence: On more than one occasion, Peter found himself stirring in response to Neal. It hadn’t just been that morning, if he was being honest. He had tried to pretend it wasn’t happening, but he could think of three other moments when he had felt a flash of lust. It had been harder to distinguish because it had been intermingled with…well, with the affection that Peter had already concluded he had for Neal. It wasn’t the strangest thing in the world. Objectively, Neal was attractive. Beautiful, really.

Peter smiled faintly, picture Neal’s slightly-too-long hair curling over his eyes, his sharp blue eyes snapping with excitement, his lean muscles flexing beneath Peter’s hands…

He gritted his teeth when he realized he had begun to absentmindedly stroke himself. Now is not the time, Burke. Keep your head in the game.

After a few deep breaths, he had himself back under control. Where was he? Oh, right.

Conclusion: Neal was sexy as fuck, and Peter wasn’t blind.

Okay, okay. Maybe it was more like…

Conclusion: Peter wanted Neal, in a way he hadn’t wanted anyone but El in over a decade.

Peter twisted the shower knob viciously to the right, and gasped at the shock of cold water. It did the trick, though, clearing his mind. He turned the water back to hot and began to rinse off.

So, what had he come up with? He liked having Neal around, Neal made his life better. He cared for Neal. He liked being needed by Neal, being his protector. And he was attracted to Neal. Fine.

Something tickled the back of his mind. Something El had said. Had been saying, for…a while.

Evidence: El seemed to think Neal was important to Peter. She had noticed something significant there, even before Peter had been willing to acknowledge it. Whenever either of them received anything from Neal, El had remarked that Peter’s “other wife” was so considerate. Recently, she had pressed Peter to admit that he was working so hard and risking so much for the kid precisely because Neal was important. El was perceptive, and if she so clearly saw this, Peter didn’t doubt that it was true.

Evidence: El had been pushing Peter to admit his feelings for Neal. More than that, she had
specifically told him that…what was it? Think about what we’ve discussed, Peter. About the way you feel about him. This might be your opportunity to…show him. What I want here is for Neal to understand what he means to us, and that has to start with you. Peter had not really understood what El was talking about, but…

Oh, shit.

Peter’s mouth dropped open. The stream from the showerhead splashed in his mouth, and he inhaled a mouthful of water, coughing it up and trying to catch his breath. He fumbled for the knob and shut off the water, and when he was okay again, he stood there, shivering and dripping.

El knew. She knew. His brilliant, perceptive, tricky wife knew that he was…he was having these feelings for Neal.

Which meant…that she wanted him to do something about it.

Peter closed his eyes and shook his head. Okay. He still wanted to talk to El, but maybe now he had an idea of what he should say. Or at least how to start the conversation. He suddenly had no doubt that she’d tell him to talk to Neal, get it out in the open.

He stepped out of the shower and towed off, then entered the bedroom to get dressed.

So, was he really going to do that? Talk to Neal? What would he even say?

Great, now he was back to that again.

As he zipped up his jeans, reviewing possible scenarios in his head, he suddenly went cold. He realized something, and it stopped him in his tracks.

Peter couldn’t talk to Neal about this. He couldn’t do anything about the way he was feeling. He couldn’t show Neal, he couldn’t act on it, he couldn’t anything.

Because, no matter how much Peter suddenly felt the urge to claim Neal for himself, he remember the most important thing: Neal was not available to claim.

Sure, technically, he was trying to claim Neal’s Contract. But that’s all that was. His Contract. That wasn’t Neal himself. The only person who could grant him Neal was…Neal.

Neal would never do that. Neal loved Kate, and he loved the life he had been living before Peter caught him. He viewed Peter’s job, and law enforcement as a whole, as a bit of a joke, a game to play. He had lost one important round, but that didn’t mean he wouldn’t jump at the chance to play again. Surely, if given the right opportunity, he would choose that over Peter.

To make matters more complicated, even if Neal did decide to choose Peter – even temporarily, because of an attraction – Peter couldn’t allow that. Neal wasn’t free to make that choice, not really. Peter could never be sure that Neal wasn’t just giving in because he thought he had to, because Peter had all the power, because he thought he could use it to manipulate Peter as the owner of his Contract. Even if Neal thought he wanted what Peter was offering, it could be because of a version of Stockholm Syndrome, or because Peter had saved his life and he felt like he owed Peter repayment, or those emotions of gratitude got all mixed up and confused with affection.

No, as long as Neal was in Peter’s charge, Peter couldn’t even ask Neal for what he wanted. It wouldn’t be right, and it wouldn’t work. Peter wouldn’t be able to live with it.

Which meant he had two choices. He could try to shove these feelings down as deep as they would
go and ignore them as hard as he could, putting some distance between them in order to cope…or
he could bide his time, enjoy their friendship, and wait out the Contract. When Neal was free, then
– and only then – could he make his offer.

He hadn’t decided which he was going to do when he descended the stairs. He could smell Neal’s
cooking, and the closer he got, the more tangled up his thoughts became. He was suddenly afraid
of one thing more than anything: that he had already screwed things up, and Neal would retreat
from the closeness they had developed.

Maybe he had already scared Neal off. Neal would back off, tell him to sleep in his own bed, want
to spend time in his room rather than in Peter’s company. He would want buffers around, so that
Peter couldn’t take advantage of him again.

Peter felt absolutely sick at the idea that that’s what had happened that morning, that he had taken
advantage of Neal’s vulnerable state and done something that Neal didn’t really want.

He had no idea how to address that, either. Suddenly, all he could think was: *Please, don’t let him
run from me.*

And so he stepped down to the ground floor a twisted mess of indecision, turned the corner, and…

He saw Neal. Hip resting against the counter, arms crossed loosely over his chest. He saw Neal’s
beautiful face, open and bright, *not awkward, not scared, not outwardly repulsed* by what had
happened earlier. He saw Neal’s bare toes peeking out from under the baggy pajama pants –
*Peter’s pants* – and felt nothing but relief.

Relief that, no matter what happened, at this moment in time, in a small way, Neal was his.

Not in the way he wanted, but Peter realized that he was the luckiest man in the world. He had the
opportunity to spend the next four years with someone he respected and admired, someone who
fascinated him and challenged him. They had been through a lot, especially in the past week, and
after all of that…

Neal was *there*, standing in his kitchen, making breakfast.

Peter felt nothing but overwhelming gratitude. The weight of his unmade decisions and his worries
about the future evaporated, and he wanted only to have breakfast sitting across from someone he
was falling for, fuck the consequences.

But then…

He wasn’t sure where things went wrong, but Neal’s open, trusting look had gone immediately
shuttered, and suddenly they were arguing. Peter barely registered what was coming out of his
mouth, or Neal’s, until Neal said:

“Look, Peter. This arrangement between us works in exactly one way. You have to understand that,
at the end of the day, you have all the power here, and I am well aware of that, no matter how
much I push against the boundaries. This isn’t like when we were tracking each other around the
world. This isn’t like when I was sending you gifts from the prison camp. I have exactly one
reasonable option here that doesn’t result in the end for me. *One.*”

Peter knew it. He knew it. Neal was trapped. He had no real choices. He felt like he had to appease
Peter, and Peter had taken advantage of him. Neal was letting Peter know that he would do what
Peter wanted, not because *Neal* wanted it, but because Peter held all the cards and could force him
to do whatever he wanted.
Peter wanted to throw up. Neal stepped closer and was suddenly standing right in front of him. Peter flattened his palms against his sides, resisting the urge to reach out and touch. Neal had made it clear that that wasn’t what he wanted.

And then, miraculously, Neal kept talking.

“But that doesn’t mean that I don’t have a choice in how I feel about it. I’m here because I want to be here. I want you to buy my Contract. Not just because it’s the only option that’s going to save my life, but because it’s a good option. It’s a great option. This is a win for me.”

A…win? Peter crinkled his forehead, trying to understand. What was Neal saying? He didn’t have a choice, or he did? And did that even matter?

“So even though you’ve got all the power, I…kind of…it’s working for me. Aren’t you curious about why it’s so easy for me to just let you do whatever you want? I’m the one who offered to be restrained last night, because I knew that you’d take care of me. I like that. I like knowing that you’ll be there for me.”

Peter felt his heart grow inside his chest.

Neal felt…maybe he felt the same way Peter did. At least in the sense that he liked having Peter take care of him.

Peter could do that. He could be satisfied with that, knowing he was filling a need Neal had, that he wasn’t imagining that there was some balance between them in that arena. He felt a little burst of hope. Hope that, just maybe, he could make it through these four years.

Neal backed up. Where was he going?

“No—“ Peter began, but Neal held up a hand.

“Have breakfast,” he said. “I’m going to take a shower. When I come down…” he sighed. “You wanted me to talk to you about Friedrich. I can’t do that right now, but maybe when I come back down, we can try.”

Peter blinked in surprise. In all the turmoil of that morning, he had completely forgotten about that. He nodded. “I’ll save you some eggs,” he said.

Neal smiled. “Thanks.”

Peter watched as Neal fled, trying to remember that Neal wasn’t actually running from him. Maybe from the moment, but not from Peter. Not after what he had said.

Still, Neal had been upset with him. Why? He tried to remember how the argument had started.

It had been right after he had come down the stairs. Neal had said something about Peter thinking he had run again. That hadn’t been what he was relieved about. Had he explained that well enough?

Probably not.

Peter sighed.

He’d wait for Neal, he decided. Then, he’d clear things up. He wouldn’t tell Neal how he was really feeling, but he’d make sure Neal knew at least part of the truth. And then they’d figure out
the mess with Friedrich, and maybe find some stable ground.

He thought about calling Elizabeth, but decided to wait. If he was wrong about what she was urging him to do, he didn’t want to hurt her.

It could wait. He was going to, after all.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry, I know you guys are waiting patiently...these guys are taking their sweet time, and there's not much I can do about it except go along for the ride. All I can say is...stay tuned for the next chapter, which I hope to write this weekend.
Chapter 31: Tension, Part 1

Friday, July 2, 10:07AM

Neal turned his head to the left and then to the right, examining his reflection in the bathroom mirror. The burn marks on his neck were starting to fade. He tapped them lightly, then pressed harder, satisfied that he only felt slight irritation at the touch. They’d clear up in another day or so. He was less happy with the dark circles under his eyes, the pale sheen of his skin – that was likely from his ordeal over the past couple of days. His cheeks were still hollow from weeks of near-starvation, but his hair was shinier, his eyes brighter. He thought that, if possible, he looked both better and worse than he had a week ago when Peter had brought him home from the Justice Facility.

What exactly did Peter see when he looked at Neal these days?

Did he see the pale skin tone, the too-thin chest and concave stomach? The bony knees and elbows? The way his eyes seemed to stare off at something far away, something that haunted him? The shakiness of his act of confidence?

Or did he still see Neal as he had been, before his arrest? When his confidence and cockiness has been real and sure, when he had been enjoying everything that life had to offer, having fun and practically sparkling?

Whatever he saw, what exactly was it that he liked? If Elizabeth was even right – never mind that Elizabeth seemed to usually be right – that Peter was into Neal in the same way that Neal was into Peter.

Neal took one last look at his current state, and then turned away. He couldn’t think about it any
longer. All he could do was make sure he was getting enough to eat, enough rest, enough
exercise…and hope that soon he’d be back into fighting form. At least on the outside. He wasn’t
sure what it would take for his insides to catch up.

He should probably have eaten breakfast. There was probably frittata left, set aside for him, but he
felt queasy. He knew that, in a few minutes, he would finally have to make good on his promise to
talk about Friedrich. He owed it to Peter to be open with him about it, especially after putting him
and Elizabeth in the middle of this mess. They needed to know what – and whom – they were
dealing with.

But if Neal told him everything, it would be a death knell for any chance they had to turn their
friendship into something more. Peter would never look at him the same way, Neal was sure of it.

The only solution he could come up with was to tell him part of the story, then pursue what he
wanted with Peter, and then – maybe – tell him the rest, if necessary. But only if necessary.

He came down the stairs to find Peter lounging on the sofa, flipping through a magazine. Peter
looked up and smiled.

“Feeling better?” he asked.

He seemed a little…unsteady, tentative. Like he wasn’t sure exactly what to say or how to act.

Neal nodded, but he hesitated himself, at the bottom of the stairs. He wanted to say something to
lighten the mood, but his throat seemed to close up on him.

“So I spoke with Jones while you were in the shower,” said Peter, tossing the magazine onto the
coffee table. “I suggested that he swing by later with some case files. Figured it would be good us
both.”

Neal nodded. That did sound good. He wanted to do something again, something useful. He was
glad Peter trusted him enough to let him work some cases, even if they were mortgage frauds.

“No, I’m not hungry,” he managed. His voice sounded okay, even though it felt like he was forcing
the words out through a narrow channel.

Peter frowned slightly. “Okay. But you have to eat something in a while. You’re still so…” he
waved his hand at Neal. “You still need to be watching nutrition.”

That was confirmation, then. Peter saw how thin he was, and didn’t like it. Or else, he preferred it
when Neal was more filled out. Suddenly feeling ashamed, he crossed his arms over his stomach
and stared at the ground.

Peter gestured at the sofa cushion beside him. “Why don’t you have a seat? If you’re ready to talk,
I mean.”

“Yeah.” Neal licked his lips and nodded, over and over, as if trying to convince himself that yes he
was ready. Ready to think about those weeks with Friedrich again. Ready to let someone else in to
that nightmare.

Finally, he forced his feet to move, and lowered himself stiffly onto the sofa.

They sat in silence for a minute. Two. Three.
“Neal.”

Neal whipped his head up to look at Peter, and Peter smiled. The smile didn’t reach his eyes, which were pools of worry.

“You already know this is important. It’s important because it’ll help us figure out how to nail Friedrich. It’ll help me to buy your Contract which…you did say that was what you wanted, right?”

“I do. I do want that. I know it’s important, Peter. I’m…I’m not backing out. I’m just trying to figure out where to start.”

Peter reached over and placed a hand on the back of Neal’s neck and squeezed slightly. Neal felt himself relax. Peter could obviously tell it had had the desired effect, because he ran his fingers up and down the nape and then squeezed again. Neal leaned back into the touch, closing his eyes.

“Start wherever it’s easiest,” said Peter. “If that’s the end, or the middle, or the beginning – or before the beginning, when you first decided to sell you Contract – it doesn’t matter. We’ll sort it out.”

Neal huffed a laugh. “Since when did you become a trauma counselor?”

“It’s part of the training,” said Peter. “But I’m also…usually I’m not as invested in the person I’m interviewing. I don’t want this to be any harder for you than it already is.”

Neal swallowed. What was the easiest place to begin?

“Okay,” he said. “How much do you know about Carl Friedrich?”

“Some,” said Peter. “When we learned who had purchased your Contract, we did some research. We know he comes from an American dynasty that built its fortune in manufacturing. We know he was personally instrumental in the passage of both PIA and ESIA.” Peter paused. “And I know he’s a grade-A asshole who I want to punch in the teeth every time I see him.”

Neal let out a surprised laugh at the vehemence in Peter’s tone. “Yeah. He’s all those things. When I decided to sell my Contract, and found out he had bought it, I did that sort of research, too.”

“Did it concern you that he was involved in PIA and ESIA?” asked Peter.

“Not really. I figured he was like many rich entitled bastards, and was trying to keep as much money as he could by lowering the cost of his personal labor force. I only had four months left on my Contract, remember. I thought I’d probably be cleaning his house or balancing his books or something. Maybe he knew I was a forger and wanted me to make him some copies of masters to hang in his foyer.” Neal rolled his eyes. “I was so wrong.”

Peter stroked Neal’s neck again while he waited for Neal to continue, and Neal tried to take comfort from that and choose the right path.

After a few minutes of silence, Peter prompted him softly. “What did he want you to do?”

Neal shook his head. That was the part he didn’t want to talk about, not yet.

“It doesn’t…it doesn’t matter. You wanted information about why he wants me dead, right? Well…I’m not one hundred percent on this, but I’m pretty sure it’s because he thinks I know something that he wants to keep quiet.”
Peter sat back and frowned. “What do you know?”

Neal snorted. “That’s the thing. I don’t know anything. Not really.”

“Why does he think you know something?” Peter leaned in, peering at him intently. “Neal,” he said, exasperation apparent in his voice, “what did you do?”

“I didn’t…I may have let him think I had found out something damaging.”

Peter sighed. He removed his hand from Neal’s neck and scrubbed at his face.


Neal clenched his teeth. He was nothing but a con, not to Peter, not really. Peter was right, in any event. He was a con. It’s why Peter didn’t trust him. It’s why he didn’t deserve Peter’s trust.

“Neal,” said Peter, “tell me what – exactly – happened.”

“Okay, okay.” Neal took a deep breath, let it out for a count of four. He had to dance around some details, here. “About a week or so in, I was able to – I found myself with free reign of the house while Friedrich was out. So I decided to do a little snooping. I thought someone as rich and sadistic as Friedrich must have some skeletons in the closet that I could use as leverage. So I snuck into his study and poked around.”

Neal glanced at Peter. He hadn’t meant to use the word sadistic, but Peter knew that Friedrich was at least slightly evil, so maybe he hadn’t said too much. Peter was frowning at him, the little wrinkle appearing between his eyes.

“Did you find anything?” asked Peter.

“I must have,” said Neal. “Only, I didn’t know it because I didn’t know what I was looking for, or at. I had tried to crack his computer password, but hadn’t had any luck, and was in the middle of flipping through a file cabinet with a bunch of bound spreadsheets in it when he came back early.”

“He caught you snooping?”

Neal gave Peter a look. “Come on, you know me better than that. I managed to slip into a closet just as he opened the door. Only, I didn’t have time to relock the file cabinet, and that must have tipped him off. He sat at his desk for about ten minutes before I heard him swear, heard the file cabinet open, and then he was stalking out the door.”

“How did he know it was you?”

Neal licked his lips. Another place he had to be careful. “Well, I wasn’t where he had left me. I tried to get back, but he went straight there, and when he saw I was missing, he flipped.”

Neal closed his eyes, remembering Friedrich’s fury, the way his face turned red and the veins on his temples bulged while he yelled at Brian and the others, asking where in the hell is Neal. Neal had known, in that moment, that he was screwed.

“I snuck into a nearby bathroom, and then walked out and tried to play it off like I had been there all along, but…he didn’t believe me. He knew my background. He knew I was…slippery.”

Peter was watching Neal with an odd expression on his face.
“What?” asked Neal. “What are you looking at?”

Peter hesitated, and then asked, “What do you mean, you weren’t where he had left you?”

“I…” Neal trailed off, then redrew his line in the sand between what he would and would not reveal. Peter wasn’t going to let that go, so he’d just make it seem normal. “He had us restrained. I escaped.”

Peter let out a breath. “Of course you did. What did he do?”

Good. It seemed like Peter was going to let that slide. It wasn’t that strange, he guessed, for owners to keep their convicts restrained. Of course, not all of Friedrich’s had been, just…the special ones.

“He…let’s just say he made it clear he wasn’t pleased.”

Peter reached out again, this time laying a hand on Neal’s shoulder. “Did he hurt you?”

“Peter…” Neal swallowed. “There are some things I’m not willing to talk about. Yet. So just…can you just not push? Do me that favor?”

“Sure,” said Peter. “Whatever you need.”

Neal relaxed, letting go of tension he hadn’t even realized he had been holding. “Thanks. So anyway, when he demanded to know what I had seen, I pretended I had seen something big. I mean, he really seemed like he thought I had. And maybe I did, but like I said, I didn’t know it.”

“Neal, why would you do that? Why wouldn’t you just say you were snooping because you couldn’t help it, and that you hadn’t seen anything?”

“Because I thought maybe I could use it. If he thought I knew something that could hurt him, maybe it would give me that leverage I had been looking for.” Neal smiled. “It was a calculated risk. I was banking on the fact that, while he could maybe…do something to me, he couldn’t actually do anything too bad. Owners aren’t allowed to just kill their convicts, you know. Besides, I don’t think he would have believed me if I had told him the truth.”

“What made you think Friedrich would follow the rules?” asked Peter. “He seems like he does what he wants and then pays people off. Or fixes it so the rules suit his needs.”

“He’s exactly like that,” said Neal. “Only, I told him I had already sent part of the information to an accomplice, and that he should expect a demand communication soon.”

Peter nodded. “So you wanted him to think he needed to keep you around in order to find out who else knew what you had discovered,” said Peter. “Smart.”

Neal couldn’t help the blush that rose at Peter’s praise. “I’ve always been a fast thinker,” he said. “And it worked. For a while.”

“You think he ultimately figured out you hadn’t communicated with anyone?” asked Peter.

Neal shrugged, dislodging Peter’s hand. “I guess,” he said. “He spent the next couple of weeks trying to get me to talk. It…”

Peter waited. Then, when Neal didn’t finish, he said, “Neal?”

“Right. Um…so you wanted to know from the beginning about the other inmate, the one who died?” Neal’s voice was barely a whisper now, and he couldn’t make himself speak louder. He
didn’t want to talk about this, but he couldn’t see a way around it.


Neal licked his lips, trying to find the right words. He may not have actually killed the other inmate, but he was responsible. It was his actions, the actions that he had just described and those that followed, that resulted in Brian’s death. When Peter found out that, ultimately, it was his fault that Brian had died, would he push Neal away? Change his mind about the Contract? About… everything else?

There was no way out but through. He just had to put it out there and take the consequences, whatever they were.

“It was Friedrich,” said Neal. “He was trying to get me to talk, and since he didn’t think I was… responding well enough when he was focused on me, he decided to focus on one of the other inmates.”

“Focus?” said Peter. “By focus, do you mean…”

“Well. I do.” Neal didn’t want to say it, but he counted to three and pushed it out all at once. “He tortured Brian. It worked. I told him I hadn’t communicated with anyone, and that I didn’t even know anything. But it was. You know. Too late.”

“The other…Brian. That was when he died?” Peter was now whispering. It was surreal. The two of them were sitting on the plush sofa, in the beautifully decorated living room, bright sunshine streaming through the windows, and they were whispering like they were huddled in some darkened corner.

Neal stared down at his hands. He was afraid to look up at Peter, afraid to see the disappointment – or worse, disgust – in his eyes. When Neal didn’t speak, Peter tucked a finger under his chin and nudged his head up.

He kept his eyes cast to the side, until Peter said, “Hey, look at me.”

Neal couldn’t help it. He caught Peter’s gaze, and braced himself for the worst, but…it wasn’t there. Instead, he saw concern, and compassion. He felt moisture pricking at his own eyes, and he blinked rapidly.

“You’re doing great, Neal,” said Peter. “Tell me about Brian. That was when he died?”

Neal had no way of resisting Peter at that moment. No way to avoid giving him what he wanted: answers.

“Yeah,” Neal managed. “Friedrich – I guess he saw an opportunity. He blamed me for it, got me sent to Justice, and requested the death penalty. Nice and easy, he took care of his problem.”

“But you didn’t know anything.”

“I think he probably thought I was lying, or maybe he just wanted to tie up loose ends. He did have a dead inmate to explain, after all.” Neal shuddered and pulled his chin out of Peter’s grip, trying not to see the image of Brian, crumpled on the wood floor, blood streaming out of the many knife wounds in his chest and abdomen. He screwed his eyes shut and pressed the heels of his hands against his eyes. The stars that burst into sight across his eyelids helped to wash the image away… a little.
Peter grabbed Neal’s hands and pulled them to his own chest. “Don’t do that,” he said. “You’re not there, you’re right here, with me. Open your eyes, look.” He gathered Neal’s slim wrists in one of his large hands and used the other to rub comfortingly up and down Neal’s forearms.

Neal shuddered again, and opened his eyes. He blinked up at Peter and found stability there.

Peter grimaced, and then he pulled Neal forward until Neal was pressed up against his chest. Neal sighed as Peter’s arms wrapped around him and Peter buried his face in Neal’s hair. Slowly, the images of Brian, of Friedrich, the flashes of his time there, began to fade again. He wasn’t sure how long they sat like that, breathing each other in, but he had no intention of moving. Maybe ever.

* WC – WC – WC – WC – WC – WC – WC *

Friday, July 2, 11:26AM

Peter held onto Neal like he might float away, hands alternately gripping his shirt and releasing it to slide his palms up and down Neal’s back. He breathed in and out, Neal’s soft hair tickling his face, and waited for Neal to stop shaking.

That had scared the shit out of him, the way that Neal had just started to vibrate and shudder. Peter wasn’t sure Neal had even been aware how badly his body was reacting to his recounting of what happened with Friedrich, but Peter had been momentarily worried that Neal was going into shock.

All that, and Neal still hadn’t told him everything. Of that, he was certain. But Neal had asked him not to push, so he wasn’t going to push. He had revealed enough for now. Enough for one day, anyhow. Enough – maybe – to pursue.

He wondered what was so bad that Friedrich would be willing to kill not one, but two people to keep it quiet. Neal had mentioned that he was looking through bound spreadsheets, and that that was what had tipped off Friedrich. Something in those spreadsheets held the key. Was it financial, then? Embezzlement?

Peter tried to imagine how much money would have to be at stake for murder to be acceptable, but then…Friedrich was a different breed of human.

He decided that, once things had settled with Neal – maybe Peter would suggest a nap – he’d call Jones and Diana again and see what they could sniff up. It wasn’t much to go on, but it was something.

After a while, Neal was still and calm. Peter pulled back slightly and peered down at him. Neal looked flushed. His eyes were slightly blurred and unfocused. Peter began to pull him back in, but Neal sat back, sliding out of Peter’s grasp.

“Thanks,” he said. “Sorry. I didn’t expect to react like that. I thought it was—“

“Stop,” said Peter. “It was rough for you to relive. It’s fine. I knew it would be, since you were so reluctant to talk about it. I’m glad you did, though. It gave me some ideas.” He tilted his head to the side, narrowed his eyes. “How do you feel?”

Neal looked away, staring out the dining room window. When he turned back to Peter, his eyes were clear again. “Not great,” he said, with a smile. “But not…not terrible, either.”

“Not terrible is a start.” Peter smiled. “You did good, Neal. Thank you for talking to me.” He paused, and then decided to try to lighten the mood. He smirked. “Of course you escaped restraints
and tried to con Friedrich. I should have guessed that from the start. You’re you, after all.

To Peter’s surprise, instead of laughing at the tease, Neal’s face fell. He stared down at his lap. “Yeah, that’s me. The con who needs to be watched at all times.”

Peter tensed. He knew, suddenly, that he had said the wrong thing. His mind went back to their earlier argument, and how it had started. Neal had thought Peter didn’t trust him. It was time Peter cleared that up.

“I think…when I came downstairs before, you said you thought…you thought I was afraid you had run. That I didn’t trust you. What made you say that?”

Neal frowned at him. “It doesn’t matter. You don’t have to trust me.”

“I…do trust you, you know. More than maybe I should. But I do. You’ve shown me I can. But earlier, you specifically thought that I didn’t. And I don’t think I cleared that up properly.”

“It’s okay, Peter. I get it. I’m a flight risk. You’re being more understanding and compassionate than I could ever really expect. Even if you don’t trust me, you’re not acting on that distrust. You’re letting me walk around unrestrained, against Court Orders. And I appreciate that.”

Peter watched Neal carefully, and easily saw the way his mask settled over his features. He put on a pleasant, slightly cocky smile. Devil-may-care, a little wistful. Perfect for charming Peter. But Peter wasn’t going to fall for it. Not this time. Neal was hurting, and Peter was going to fix it.

“It’s not okay, because I really don’t think you understand – look, when I came downstairs, you probably…you saw me looking relieved. That’s what you said.”

“You did look relieved.”

“I was. Relieved. Incredibly relieved. But not for the reason you thought.” Peter ran a hand through his hair and shook his head. Why was this so hard? He tried coming in from a different angle. “When I said that I was happy you were here, I didn’t mean I was just happy you hadn’t left, okay?”

“What other alternative is there?” asked Neal, still smiling slightly. He looked as if he had accepted his fate.

“Maybe I meant exactly what I said. That I was just…happy you were here. Happy that I came down my stairs and you were in the kitchen, and it made me…” He sighed. “I liked seeing you there.”

Neal’s soft smile didn’t budge. “Okay,” he said. “But come on…you can admit it, I’m not going to get upset again. You were also relieved I hadn’t tried to run.”

Peter threw up his hands. “Damn it, Neal, I nearly lost you. Twice, as a point of fact, in the past forty-eight hours alone. Three times since I got you out of the Justice Facility. And if you count the Justice Facility itself, four times. Four fucking times.”

He wanted to stand, to pace, but he forced himself to stay seated. He needed Neal to understand what he was saying. El wanted him to show Neal that he was cared for and wanted, and even if Peter couldn’t reveal all of his feelings, he was damn well going to make sure Neal understood his worth.

“When I heard Friedrich say what he had selected for his Justice, I nearly had a heart attack on the
When we found you, I was so relieved you were still alive I couldn’t breathe. When I saw you in the Justice Facility, it broke my heart. When I got you home, I couldn’t believe my luck. And then…the car, and Hagan, and Vega. Neal…”

Peter knew his voice was rising, both in volume and pitch. He felt his heart beating in his chest, and knew he was screwing this up. Neal was staring at him, his eyes wide, his lips slightly parted. He was probably scaring the kid, for god’s sake.

He reached out and grabbed Neal’s shoulders, just in case he was going to back away and retreat again. He needed Neal to hear him out.

“Did you ever think that maybe I like having you around? That I like you? That you’re fucking important to me? That after what we went through the past couple of days, when I saw you standing in my kitchen, in my pajamas, barefoot, cooking breakfast, all I could think was thank god he’s still here…not because I thought you might run, but because just a day and a half ago you died in my arms? Jesus, Neal—”

Neal made a small, high pitched noise, and then lunged forward. Suddenly, Peter had his arms full of Neal Caffrey, all hard lean muscles and sharp angles as Neal had somehow climbed into his lap.

But the thing that made Peter stop talking was Neal’s mouth crushed against his own.
Tension, Part Two

Chapter Summary

Neal had a thought pass through the edge of his mind that maybe he shouldn’t be doing this. Maybe he shouldn’t have launched himself at Peter without warning, maybe he should have asked for permission. But he couldn’t seem to make himself care, not when he finally – finally – had a taste of what he had been craving for…well, for longer than he probably would be willing to admit if asked.

Chapter Notes

As promised.

It will likely be a week or so before I can update again.

Love you all.

Chapter 32: Tension, Part 2

Friday, July 2, 11:37AM

When Peter brought up their earlier argument, Neal cringed inside. After forcing out part of the story about his time with Friedrich, and after collapsing into Peter’s arms, he was feeling loose, and calm, for the first time in a long while. The weight that seemed to be ever present on his shoulders had shifted, lightened, as if someone had picked up half of it and was helping him carry it.

Seemed like the shrinks were right: sometimes talking about something made it easier to deal with.

Since he was feeling so centered and less burdened, he didn’t want to talk about the tension between them from earlier. He had accepted that Peter didn’t trust him. He couldn’t really blame Peter for that, despite what he had said; Neal hadn’t been around long enough to earn Peter’s trust back, regardless of the fact that he hadn’t run when he had the chance, or had taken down Hagan. He’d keep trying, and maybe someday Peter would have faith in him. Once he deserved it.

He tried to say as much, but Peter pressed the issue, so he tried to turn the conversation around and acknowledge that, trust or not, he appreciated the way Peter was treating him.

“It’s okay, Peter. I get it. I’m a flight risk. You’re being more understanding and compassionate than I could ever really expect. Even if you don’t trust me, you’re not acting on that distrust. You’re letting me walk around unrestrained, against Court Orders. And I appreciate that.”

Peter was looking at him searchingly, so Neal smiled and tilted his head to the side. I’m fine with this, he tried to say with his relaxed features and understanding eyes. You’re fine, we’re fine, don’t worry about it. Let’s not argue.
But Peter frowned, little lines appearing around his mouth. When he spoke, he seemed determined, like a dog with a bone. He wasn’t going to let this slide.

“It’s not okay,” he said, “because I really don’t think you understand – look, when I came downstairs, you probably…you saw me looking relieved. That’s what you said.”

“You did look relieved,” Neal couldn’t help but point out. He may have accepted that Peter didn’t trust him, and felt that he deserved that, but that didn’t mean it didn’t bother him at all.

“I was. Relieved. Incredibly relieved. But not for the reason you thought.” Peter ran a hand through his hair and shook his head, as though trying to reset his thoughts. “When I said that I was happy you were here, I didn’t mean I was just happy you hadn’t left, okay?”

Right, Neal thought. He appreciated Peter’s attempt to make him feel better about it, really he did.

“What other alternative is there?” he asked. He was careful to keep his expression gentle, accepting, even though he felt sick inside. He didn’t want to keep talking about this.

“Maybe I meant exactly what I said. That I was just…happy you were here. Happy that I came down my stairs and you were in the kitchen, and it made me…” He sighed. “I liked seeing you there.”

“Okay,” said Neal. He thought about letting it go at that, but suddenly he was talking again, his stomach twisting. “But come on…you can admit it, I’m not going to get upset again. You were also relieved I hadn’t tried to run.”

Peter threw up his hands. “Damn it, Neal, I nearly lost you. Twice, as a point of fact, in the past forty-eight hours alone. Three times since I got you out of the Justice Facility. And if you count the Justice Facility itself, four times. Four fucking times.”

Neal blinked at the harsh tone. I nearly lost you, is what Peter had said. But what did he mean by that? Peter kept talking, practically vibrating in his seat.

“When I heard Friedrich say what he had selected for his Justice, I nearly had a heart attack on the spot. When we found you, I was so relieved you were still alive I couldn’t breathe. When I saw you in the Justice Facility, it broke my heart. When I got you home, I couldn’t believe my luck. And then…the car, and Hagan, and Vega. Neal…”

What?

Neal tried to comprehend what Peter was telling him. It sounded an awful lot like…

“Did you ever think that maybe I like having you around? That I like you? That you’re fucking important to me? That after what we went through the past couple of days, when I saw you standing in my kitchen, in my pajamas, barefoot, cooking breakfast, all I could think was thank god he’s still here…not because I thought you might run, but because just a day and a half ago you died in my arms? Jesus, Neal—”

Neal’s carefully constructed façade came tumbling down at Peter’s last speech. He lost all control of his body and reacted without thought. He found himself draped over Peter, arms grabbing at shoulders and hair, unclear on exactly what he was trying to do, until—

His lips met Peters with a brutal force, crashing their teeth and jaws together in a way that would have been painful if that pain sensation weren’t being overridden by a feeling of oh my god.
Neal had a thought pass through the edge of his mind that maybe he shouldn’t be doing this. Maybe he shouldn’t have launched himself at Peter without warning, maybe he should have asked for permission. But he couldn’t seem to make himself care, not when he finally – finally – had a taste of what he had been craving for... well, for longer than he probably would be willing to admit if asked.

Peter’s lips, slack and surprised at first, quickly got with the program. He tilted his head to the left, seeking firmer purchase, and Neal responded in kind, mouth parting at the new angle and pressure. Peter shifted forward slightly as his tongue slid into Neal’s mouth, as if he were chasing something. Neal ceded control, since his body was incapable of following the directions of his brain, and Peter set a deliberate pace tinged with restrained desperation.

Neal was feeling the need to be less restrained.

His fingers found themselves in Peter’s hair, and he tightened his grip. A growl crawled up from deep in Peter’s chest. Neal felt Peter’s hand tugging at his hair in kind, which evoked a high-pitched whine and made Neal press closer. With a supreme effort, he managed to extract one leg from under him and sling it across Peter’s lap, shifting so he was straddling the man, all without interrupting the fucking incredible things Peter was doing with his tongue.

Peter let go of Neal’s hair and grabbed Neal’s hips, squeezing tight. Neal moaned and surged forward, into the heat at Peter’s core. Neal was hard as a rock, and from what he could tell, Peter was getting there fast.

He began to see stars behind his eyelids, and had an errant thought that he hadn’t breathed in a while. With difficulty, he pulled his mouth away from Peter’s, and they both sucked in a noisy breath. Peter tilted his head back – to get more air? – and Neal took advantage of that to taste the skin at his throat.

Peter let out a noisy whoosh of breath and gripped Neal even tighter as Neal licked and sucked at Peter’s neck and shoulder, humming at the salty, tangy, Peter-ness of it. He tasted even better than Neal thought he would, and for a moment, Neal wondered how else he would taste.

Neal had no idea how long Peter let him do this, but when he tested the boundaries a little by scraping his teeth at the joint between Peter’s neck and shoulder, applying just a little pressure, Peter swore.

“Jesus, fuck.”

Neal smiled and bit down, licking at the skin trapped between his teeth.

“Fuck, Neal. You—fuck.”

Yes, thought Neal. He released Peter’s skin from his teeth and licked at it again, soothing the red marks he had left. Peter’s hands traveled up from Neal’s hips to his shoulders, and Peter pushed at him slightly. Neal slid his face up the cord of muscle at Peter’s neck until his nose rested in the space behind Peter’s ear. He blew out slightly and then inhaled.

“Wait—”

Neal didn’t like the sound of that, so he shifted again, pressing his hips forward and grinding himself against Peter at the same time that he licked around Peter’s earlobe and into the shell of his ear.

Peter let out a strangled noise, followed by: “Neal.”
“Mmmhmmm?” Neal ground forward again.

“Stop, you have to – *fuck.*”

Peter grabbed onto Neal’s hair and yanked his head back and away from Peter’s neck. Neal whined and strained forward. *God,* he couldn’t help it *at all.* It was like his body was doing its entirely own thing, completely separate from any conscious directions coming from his brain. He registered that Peter was trying to get him to stop, but…it was like he had been in the desert for years and finally reached an oasis, and someone told him he could only have a sip of water. No matter what his brain had to say about it, his body would be damned if he would be satisfied with a sip.

Peter held him back firmly, both men panting, chests heaving. Slowly, the stinging pain in Neal’s scalp – he was still trying to pull his head from Peter’s grip – registered through the haze of lust.

He blinked, and was able to focus on Peter. It was like being doused with cold water. Or at least lukewarm water. Peter’s eyes were strained, conflicted. His pupils were blown wide with desire, but layered over that was concern and pain. Neal stopped fighting Peter’s grip and relaxed backward slightly, easing up the tension on his scalp.

Neal felt Peter’s fingers loosen but not release his hair.

“Wait,” said Peter. “Just—“

“*Why?*” asked Neal. He licked his lips, feeling how sensitive they were from the recent abuse.

“Because we can’t—“

“*Why not?*” Neal surged forward. Peter was surprised by the move and let go of Neal’s hair. Neal went for Peter’s lips, but he turned away at the last second.

“Because – just hang on a second, *fuck,*” said Peter, gasping when Neal set his teeth to the edge of Peter’s jaw, feeling them catch on the two-day stubble with a satisfying rasp.

“I hope so,” said Neal, murmuring against Peter’s jaw. There it went again, his control over his body. And, apparently, his mouth.

Apparently deciding that pushing Neal away wasn’t going to work, Peter changed tactics. He wrapped an arm around Neal’s back and placed another on the back of his head and pulled him in tight, so that Neal was trapped against Peter’s chest.

Neal struggled a moment, and then relaxed. From this angle, he could nose along Peter’s collarbone and up towards the underside of his jaw, and that was a pretty nice place to be.

Peter let out a soft sound, and then took a deep breath. Neal reveled in the feeling of rising and falling against Peter’s chest.

“Okay?” said Peter, tucking his chin down and rubbing his cheek against the top of Neal’s head.

“Okay,” whispered Neal.

“Okay.” They breathed together, their rhythms finding each other and falling in sync, for a full minute before Peter spoke again. “That was…“

Neal waited. From the tone of his voice, it didn’t sound like Peter was going to say something negative. Still, he sounded conflicted. Sure enough, when he spoke again, it was with measured
“Neal, we need to stop and think for a second, okay?”

Neal shook his head against Peter’s shirt. “Thinking has gotten us nowhere. Can we not think for a second instead?”

Peter laughed. “We did that. Just now, that was us not thinking. This isn’t a good idea, and we need to be smart.”

Neal snorted. “I am smart. That’s what you like best about me, if I remember correctly.”

“Maybe not best,” murmured Peter.

Neal slid his hands around to Peter’s chest and pushed himself up. Peter let him, but he didn’t removed his arms, simply letting his hands rest on the small of Neal’s back, two warm spots that would likely start – continue? – being very distracting.

“Peter, don’t…don’t logic yourself out of this,” said Neal. “What’s the problem?” He narrowed his eyes in a challenge. “Tell me you didn’t like that.”

Peter closed his eyes. “I can’t,” he said, “because I did. I think you know that. Neal, I’m not…I’m not saying no. I’m saying wait.” When he opened his eyes again, they were deep pools of golden brown, and Neal felt himself melting forward, towards them, without any conscious thought.

He was stopped by a hand gently cupping his cheek. That would have to do, he decided, and nuzzled into it. Peter let out a soft laugh.

“God. You’re so…” He trailed off, then cleared his throat. “So I guess we’re past the phase of wondering whether our attraction to each other is returned. Trouble is, we skipped over the things that make this complicated.”

“Like what?” asked Neal. “You want a thing, I want a thing, they’re the same thing. Seems like a recipe for happiness all around.”

“I wish it were that simple,” said Peter. “First of all, Elizabeth—“

“Is fine with it,” said Neal. He began placing small kisses on Peter’s palm. “I asked.”

“She’s fine with…you what?”

Neal continued to nibble at Peter’s palm, smirking with satisfaction when Peter flexed his hand and his breathing shifted. When Peter pulled his hand away, Neal pouted at him.

“Neal. Focus. What do you mean, you asked?”

Neal rolled his eyes. “I talked to her this morning. She said she was fine with me and you. Together. Like this.”

Peter gaped at him. “You called my wife, and asked her if…what? If you could kiss me? Sleep with me? You didn’t think to ask me first?”

Neal sighed and sat up straight again. “I didn’t call her to ask her about that. I called her to apologize for putting her out of her house.”

Peter’s gaze softened. “Hey, I told you to cut that out. It’s not your fault.”
“Maybe not, but it is because of me. Anyway, that’s why I called. She’s actually the one that brought this up.”

The shock returned to Peter’s face. “She brought up…us? What did she…what did she…”

“She told me that you were crazy about me, and that she wanted me to make a move, because we were torturing each other and you would never do it. She said she had made her peace with it long ago.”

Peter dragged a hand through his own hair, and looked up at the ceiling. “El,” he muttered. “I swear to god, that woman…”

“Is smarter than either of us,” said Neal. “Because I don’t think I realized what I was feeling until a couple of days ago, and she said she wasn’t sure if you had figured out how you felt yet.”

Peter grimaced. “Well, you may have talked to her, but I haven’t. And…I need to.”

Neal nodded. That was fair, he figured. “Call her,” he said.

“Right now?”

“You have something more pressing to do? Anything I can help you with?” asked Neal, running a finger down Peter’s chest towards his stomach. Peter caught his wrist before he could descend lower.

“I’m…I’ll call her. But that’s not the only problem here.”

Neal slumped, shaking his head. He couldn’t believe Peter. Frustrating, thinks-too-much, can’t possibly take a risk without weighing all the pros and cons, Peter. He felt his heart fall, seeing the inevitable direction this conversation was headed. “You’re actually going to do it,” he said. “You’re actually going to logic yourself out of this.”

“Hey,” said Peter. “Come on. This is important.”

“Fine,” said Neal, straightening up once more. He shifted backward slightly, so that his ass was resting on the edge of Peter’s knees. It wasn’t lost on him that Peter had stopped their progress, but had not actually made him move.

“I’m worried that…Neal, this is a bad idea because of the position we’re in,” said Peter. Neal frowned, and Peter took that as his cue to continue. “Meaning, I’m trying to buy your Contract, which means I own you for the next four years.”

Neal’s frown deepened. “So?” he asked. “Seems like that makes this a great idea. May as well enjoy our time together.”

“You’re skipping over the part where – as you said yourself this morning – I have all the power. I’m not comfortable entering into any sort of…relationship…with you when I have that much power over your fate.”

Okay, Neal could see where Peter, with all his steadfast commitment to morals and doing the right things, would have an issue with this. But Neal had an argument – several, in fact.

Neal cocked his head and tried his first, most straightforward argument. “Seems to me you said you weren’t intending to treat this like a typical Contract,” he said. “If I recall, you said it would just be on paper, for practical reasons, and that you weren’t planning to be that kind of Owner.”
“Sure,” said Peter. “But you said, and I quote, ‘You have to understand that, at the end of the day, you have all the power here.’ Didn’t you?”

Neal shrugged. “Yeah. I also said that that didn’t mean I didn’t have a choice how I felt about it, and that I wanted to be here. That I felt fine about that arrangement and was happy to let you have that power over me. For as long as it lasts.”

They eyed each other, and Peter sighed. “Fine. But I’m not sure I trust that – not that I don’t trust you,” he said quickly, at Neal’s expression, “but that I’m not sure it’s possible for you to actually be honest about how you feel, even if you think you are. Think about it like this: you said yourself that you have only one option. What if your brain, in order to preserve your own sanity, justifies your inability to actually make a choice by pretending that this is a choice you would make if allowed? You’re tricking yourself into being okay with something because even if you’re not okay with it, you can’t do anything about it, so it’s safer to pretend than to face that fact.”

Neal burst out laughing. Peter was on a roll.

“Don’t laugh at me. At this,” said Peter. “It’s a valid concern. Maybe you’re feeling this way about me because I’m helping you, and your gratitude is getting mixed up with some other feeling. Maybe you don’t actually want me, you just want to thank me. You don’t have to thank me like this. You don’t have to thank me at all. And I don’t want you to wake up at some point and regret this and resent me, feeling like I forced you or you had to--”

Neal stuck out a hand and clapped it over Peter’s mouth. Peter’s eyes widened in surprise. “I get it,” said Neal. “You’re worried that I’m either only doing this because I think you want it and I have to in order to keep you happy with me, or that I’m only doing it because I’m suffering from a version of Stockholm Syndrome. Do I have that right?”

Peter hesitated, looking like he wanted to add something, but he finally nodded. Neal kept his hand in place.

“Let me ease your worries, Agent Burke,” said Neal. “I have been having these feelings about you since long before last week.”

Neal dropped his hand, and Peter squinted at him. “You have? Since when?”

“Since…I’m not sure. But…a long time, I think. I just didn’t know exactly what it was for a while. I’ve been attracted to you since before you caught me. I just didn’t start actively fantasizing about acting on those attractions until we started…sleeping together. It didn’t change anything, just made me admit what I had already been feeling.”

Neal held his breath. It had been easier to admit that than he had thought it would be, but he wasn’t sure how Peter would react. Peter was looking at him with an odd expression, a mix between wonder and hope.

“Listen,” said Neal. “How about this? You may not trust me to known my own mind, but I trust you enough to believe you would stop if I told you to stop. I trust that if I said, never mind, or no more, you would back off and it wouldn’t change our Contract arrangement. Or our working arrangement. Am I right?”

“Of course,” said Peter. “God, Neal. If we were to…if this…it would be totally up to you. The second – and I mean the second – you changed your mind, I would respect that. I couldn’t…I wouldn’t want to ever do anything you weren’t okay with. Whether we’re in this arrangement or not.”
Neal grinned. “So who, exactly, has the power here?”

Understanding moved across Peter’s face. “In this area, you do. One hundred percent.”

“Well,” said Neal, shifting closer. “How about more like fifty-fifty? I mean, I would do the same for you. Or Elizabeth,” he said, frowning. “If she changed her mind about being okay with us, I would back off. So maybe it’s thirty-three and a third percent each.”

Peter chuckled. “Yeah. That sounds about right. Only…”

“Only what?” asked Neal. He had been slowly leaning forward, as if drawn towards Peter like a magnet, but stopped.

“Only…I’m not going to change my mind,” said Peter. “Once I’m in, I’m in. So I guess you don’t have to worry about my third.”

Neal’s mouth went dry. He hadn’t dared to hope for an admission like that. Even on the heels of what had spurred him into action in the first place, he hadn’t expected there to be any promises involved. It made something inside him shiver, and he found himself asking one final question.

“Peter, Elizabeth said you—” he paused. He wanted to ask this with a cocky smirk, a raised eyebrow, something flirtatious. But he couldn’t muster up the persona, and eventually he just charged ahead. “She said you were crazy about me. Was she right? Are you crazy about me?”

Peter’s eyes went darker than ever, and he reached out and threaded his fingers through Neal’s hair. “Crazy like a heart attack.”

Neal sputtered. “That’s not the expression. It’s serious as a—“

“That too,” said Peter, and without warning, he closed the distance between them, meeting Neal’s lips with his own.

It was softer this time, less desperate, more explorative. Peter’s hands framed Neal’s face, his thumbs brushing gently against his cheeks. Neal rested his own hands on Peter’s chest, squeezing fistfuls of his shirt, containing his need for more, faster. He let Peter continue the leisurely pace, and after a minute, a kind of serenity washed over him.

He felt safe here. Like he was important, or precious. Like he mattered in some way. He felt walls inside him crumbling, and a sob bubbled up from his chest. Peter pulled away an inch.

“Oh?” he asked, leaning his forehead to rest against Neal’s.

Neal could only nod, then reach up with his mouth until he found Peter again.

The clock on the wall ticked methodically, and other than that Neal could only hear their breath coming in complementary rhythm, the rustle of their clothes, his own heart thudding in his chest.

Peter turned his head, and Neal whined at the loss of his mouth. But then Peter trailed his lips along the side of Neal’s jaw and down his neck, nibbling and tasting Neal the way he had tasted Peter earlier. Peter’s stubble scratched along Neal’s sensitive skin, and he nearly moaned at the sensation.

Just as Peter reached the hollow beneath Neal’s Adam’s apple, the sound of the doorbell echoed through the room.
They both jumped and sprang apart, Neal tumbling onto the floor, unable to unfold his legs in time. Peter grabbed at him and prevented him from slamming into the coffee table behind him.

The doorbell sounded again, and Peter glanced up at the front door, then towards the bay window.

Neal had a moment to wonder if they had been visible from the street, and then Peter was hauling him up, back onto the sofa beside him.

“You all right?” asked Peter, cupping his hand on Neal’s cheek.

Neal nodded. “Fine,” he said. “But I’m about to shoot whoever is at your fucking door.”

Peter laughed. “Me too,” he said. He stood, and then looked down at Neal and shook his head. He smoothed a hand over Neal’s hair. “Wait here,” he said. “I’ll send the asshole packing.”
Tension: Part 3

Chapter Summary

Interruptions, interference, tension builds.

Chapter Notes

I'm back! For the moment. This chapter has been a beast, and with work making me crazy, it has been tough to get through it. I finally gave up when I realized that I was writing a whole novel inside this chapter and broke it in two.

The good news? You'll probably get a quicker update than otherwise possible, since most of the next chapter is already written.

The bad news? Continued tension.

I can't help it, I like the tension.

Chapter 33: Tension, Part 3

Friday, July 2, 12:22PM

Peter wasn’t a believer in divine intervention. He didn’t put much stock in signs, and he had no use for trying to figure out what was “meant to be” or not. He may have used the expression now and again, as you do when you aren’t sure what else to say, but in general, he thought you made choices based on information you had and your own moral code and values, and dealt with the consequences, hoping that doing the right thing would work out for you in the end.

And if it didn’t? It wasn’t because of karma or cosmic payback, it was just because sometimes things happened.

So he wasn’t bothered by the way the surprise visitor with his ill-timed doorbell interrupted the moment he was having with Neal, not really. He was actually a little grateful for it. He could feel himself getting carried away, letting himself throw caution to the wind, ignore all his misgivings, and jump into the deep end without a life preserver.

Neal may be a man driven by emotional impulse, but Peter preferred to act more deliberately.

He didn’t take the interruption as an indication that what they were doing was wrong, but he was glad that it had paused the train before it had really left the station. He had some thinking to do – and some calling Elizabeth to do – before things moved any further forward.

Still, as he paused at the front door, taking a moment to smooth out his shirt, settle his hair, and adjust himself, thankful that his jeans partially masked his state of arousal, he couldn’t help but look over his shoulder. He watched Neal similarly try to deal with his own obvious issue – his
linen trousers a little less helpful in that area – and delighted in how utterly rumpled the kid looked.

“Neal,” he said quietly.

Neal looked up, his eyes dark, his hair sticking up in several directions, his shirt askew. Peter motioned at his own clothes and hair, and Neal’s eyes widened. He jumped to his feet.

“I’ll just go…freshen up,” he muttered, blushing.

He crossed to the stairs, passing behind Peter, who thought: what the hell. He whirled around and grabbed Neal by the wrist. In one move, he had Neal pressed up against the wall, their mouths sealed together, in one last, punishing kiss.

He stepped back, and Neal staggered. “Jesus, Peter,” he said, and then his face lit up in a brilliant grin. “Tell me how you really feel.” With a cocky wink, he bounded up the stairs two at a time.

Peter shook his head fondly and turned back to the front door, where the visitor was leaning on the doorbell once again.

It was Jones. Of course it was Jones, they had agreed he’d stop by, Peter had just momentarily… forgotten.

“Hey, Peter,” said Jones. He was carrying a box of files, and behind him was Diana.

“We brought lunch, Boss,” she said, holding up several bags from the deli around the corner. “Move aside, Jones, I’m starving.”

Without waiting for him to respond, they surged forward. He stepped back and out of the way, and watched them fill up the space in his living room. Diana was talking excitedly.

“So I have some news that I think you’re gonna like. Jones said he was headed out here to bring you guys some case files, and I thought, I’d like to see Neal’s all right, and Wouldn’t it be great to share this news in person, so I came along. Hope that’s okay. Where is Neal, anyway?”

She crossed into the dining room and plunked the deli bags down, then, without waiting for an answer, plowed into the kitchen, the door swinging shut behind her.

Jones looked at Peter and shrugged, expression contrite. “Sorry,” he said. “I know we didn’t talk about a joint working session here or anything, but Diana said—“

Peter waved away his concerns. “It’s fine,” he said. “Good, in fact. Neal and I were…going a little stir crazy. We could use the distraction.”

And it would give Peter some time to set his affairs – and his mind – in order without offending Neal. He had already decided he was going to let Neal make the decision here, and trust that he did know what he wanted. Neal had persuaded him of that much. Still, Peter needed to make sure he had addressed all of his concerns before he lost the ability to think logically. Jones and Diana would serve as a useful buffer while they both got used to the idea.

Jones set the box on the coffee table and joined Diana as she re-emerged from the kitchen, plates and forks and napkins in hand. They were pulling the food from the bags and arguing over how many pastrami sandwiches they had ordered versus how many they had received when Neal descended the stairs. He was completely put together, his hair and clothes in place, and he looked calm and composed.
Peter missed the rumpled look.

“There he is,” said Diana. “Back from the grave. How you feeling? Did you see a light? Tell me you saw a light and turned away.”

Neal blinked at her, and then laughed. “It’s good to see you too, Diana. Clinton.”

Jones stepped forward and shook Neal’s hand. “Glad to see you up and around,” he said. He paused and leaned forward slightly, squinting at Neal’s face.

Neal’s hand came up and patted at his cheeks. “What?” he said. “Do I have some strange growth or something?”

Jones glanced at Peter, and then back at Neal. “No, sorry,” he said. “I was just checking out the damage.”

Neal touched gently at the burn marks on his neck. “Yeah,” he said. “It’s actually in pretty good shape.”

“That collar will be back on in no time,” said Diana. Then she cringed. “Sorry, that was probably rude.”

“Don’t worry about it,” said Neal. “You’re right. What’s all that?”

“This,” said Diana, “is your lunch banquet. Take your pick. You want turkey and provolone? Pastrami on rye? An Italian with everything? A grilled reuben that smells like heaven? We’ve got potato salad and egg salad and chips and pickles. A New Yorker’s dream.”

“People keep bringing me food,” said Neal. “I must be even skinnier than I thought.”

Peter clapped a hand on his back. “We’ll fatten you up, not to worry. Let’s eat. Diana has promised us news while we’re at it.”

Within a few minutes, they had settled at the kitchen table and were digging in to the spread. Peter sat beside Neal. After taking a large bite of his Italian sub, he carefully slid his foot a few inches to the left until he found Neal’s, and pressed against him, knee to ankle.

Neal paused mid-swallow, and then Peter felt the return pressure.

“Okay, so. You want the news?” asked Diana.

“You know we do,” said Peter. “What is this about?”

Her eyes sparkled. “When I started to track Vega from the hospital through the city, I thought it would take forever. Imagine my surprise when he got into a taxi a few blocks from the hospital.”

“A taxi,” said Peter. “Did you get the medallion number?”

“I did,” she said. “This morning, I tracked down the cabbie and had a little chat. You are never going to guess where that cab went last night.”

Peter could feel Neal tense beside him. He pressed against his leg again.

“Tell us,” said Peter. “The suspense is killing Neal.”

She chuckled. “It went to the Plaza hotel.”
“The Plaza?” said Peter. “Seems a bit…posh…for an ex-con.”

“Hey,” said Neal. “I could find a way to swing a night at the Plaza.”

“Yes, you could,” said Peter. “Antoine Vega is not Neal Caffrey. Somehow I can’t imagine him convincing anyone that he belongs there. He doesn’t have your style.”

Neal shot Peter a delighted look, and then ducked his head. After a moment, he gathered himself and looked up again. “So Vega isn’t the type to be able to afford the Plaza. This is…good news? Why?”

Diana’s grin widened. “It’s great news. Because guess who is staying at the Plaza?”

“Please tell me it’s Friedrich,” said Peter.

“It’s Friedrich,” said Diana. “At least, we think so. There was a temporary charge on one of his credit cards from a couple of nights ago. We think he’s been staying there while he’s in the city. You know, for the hearing and whatnot.”

Jones spoke up. “Only, the hearing was over two days ago. There would have been no reason for him to stay. Unless he had some…other business…to take care of.”

“I suppose that ‘other business’ was murdering me,” said Neal dryly.

“You’re right, this is great news,” said Peter. “So we have a potential link between Vega and Friedrich. Can we make it better than potential?”

“Working on it,” said Diana. “I’m working on getting a warrant to get access to Plaza security footage – if you’re okay with that – so that we can see where in the hotel Vega went and if we can catch Friedrich there too, or at least link the room to the charge on his card.”

“I’m okay with it,” said Peter. “Good plan.”

“We also have a man sitting on the hotel,” said Jones. “It might be a long shot, since Vega and/or Friedrich might have already departed, but until we get that footage we thought the next best thing —”

“Would be someone who could testify. Again, good work.” Peter nodded with satisfaction. He did have a crack team by his side. It made him feel better about taking a few days to work from home. He could trust that things wouldn’t go off the rails while he wasn’t there to keep an eye on them.

Peter took another bite of his sub before he remembered. “Oh, and we have some more information about Friedrich that might give us some leads to follow,” he said.


“From me,” said Neal, his eyes focused on his plate. “About what happened while I was…with him. And why he might be interested in…”

“In seeing you six feet under?” Diana winced. “Sorry, again. I have to stop saying shit like that.”

Neal looked up, and he had a smile on his face. “It’s fine,” he said. “Actually, don’t stop. I like knowing you say what you think. Makes me think you mean what you say.”

Diana smirked. “Always,” she said.
“So what’s the information?” asked Jones.

Peter glanced at Neal, and he inclined his head. Peter took that to mean Neal would rather Peter explain. He considered the information Neal had told him, and tried to figure out how to give Jones and Diana what they would need to move forward without revealing the emotional content that had Neal so vulnerable earlier.

“Well,” he said, “it seems our Neal decided to be himself—“ he smirked at Neal, hoping the kid would take it playfully, “—and did some snooping in Friedrich’s office while he wasn’t home.”

Diana rolled her eyes. “That’s our Neal,” she said. To Peter’s relief, Neal looked more amused and…maybe a little proud…at the comments.

“He didn’t find anything of note, but Friedrich thinks he did, and it seems that Friedrich would rather tie up loose ends than risk the information getting out.” There. Peter thought that effectively got out the main ideas without getting into the details of the torture and the other inmate’s death. Which could be helpful to them too, but…one thing at a time.

“What did you see? What does he think you know?” asked Jones.

Neal shrugged. “I honestly have no idea,” he said. “But it must have something to do with his financials, since I didn’t have time to relock a file drawer with printed books of spreadsheets before he found out I had been there. Something in those books is whatever he doesn’t want to get out.”

“Financials,” said Diana thoughtfully. “We’ve been watching his accounts, but haven’t dug deeper. Maybe we should. I’ll get a team on it.”

“Good,” said Peter. “Actually, can you also send anything our way? Neal might recognize something if he sees it again. Right?”

Neal nodded. “It’s possible. I don’t…I don’t really remember anything I saw. So much has happened since then. But if I see it again, it might trigger something in my subconscious.”

“All right, so our game plan is that I’ll get the Plaza warrant and grab the security footage, and in the meantime we’ll get a team digging into Friedrich’s financials. Are you still concerned that he’ll find out we’re looking?”

Peter thought about that, but it was Neal who spoke up.

“I think he’s probably already doing the most extreme thing he could do by trying to have me killed,” he said. “Right? What harm could it do, other than making him try to hide something, which he’s probably already done?”

Peter nodded in agreement. “Yes, I think the time for caring about being discreet is in the past.” He paused, and then grinned. “In fact, the more obvious we can be, the better. He threatened me to my face, let’s threaten him back.”

Neal raised his eyebrows. “Why Peter,” he said. “I didn’t know you had it in you.”

“Maybe you don’t know me as well as you think,” he said. “Just you wait.”

Peter realized, a step too late, that his voice held an inflection that may not have been wise or appropriate in front of Diana and Jones. Neal blinked at him, his eyes going slightly unfocused. He licked his lips, and Peter’s stomach did a somersault.
Jones cleared his throat. “So we have a plan. Meanwhile, I brought this huge stack of unsolved cases for you guys to tackle. Should we...dig in? I can show you what I brought?”

With a quick shake of his head, Peter tore his eyes away from Neal, who was still looking... distracted. He pushed his plate away and got to his feet.

“I’ve got a phone call to make,” he said. “Diana, why don’t you do what you need to do to get that warrant, and Jones, you can fill Neal in on the case files. I’ll be back in a bit.”

As he crossed behind Neal, he let his hand trail across the kid’s back in a way he hoped was (a) reassuring and (b) subtle. Neal moved into the touch as if it was the most natural thing in the world.

“Sounds good,” said Neal. “Let me just clean this stuff up.”

“You don’t have to—“ Peter began. He didn’t want Neal to feel like it was his job to take care of all of the annoying housekeeping tasks, especially if they were going to be entering into an arrangement where power imbalance was a concern.

Neal waved his hand. “Diana has calls to make, you have calls to make, and Jones is going to be pulling out all those files. I can pick up the plates.”

Peter let it go, and with a nod to the trio, he headed for the stairs. He had a very important call to make, and it needed to be private.

* WC – WC – WC – WC – WC – WC – WC *

Friday, July 2, 1:40PM

Neal watched Peter go. He was under no illusions about the “call” Peter needed to make. He was going to call his wife.

It was a good thing, Neal reminded himself as he gathered up the lunch dishes. No matter that it made him a little nervous. Elizabeth had already given Neal the go ahead. More than that, she had practically ordered him to make a move on Peter. She would encourage Peter the same way, he was sure.

He wasn’t really concerned the call would make Peter rethink things. Not really. Not after it seemed like he had opened up the floodgates, considering how Peter had slammed him against the wall by the door, played footsie with him under the table during lunch, and slid his finger in a long, electric line across Neal’s back, right in front of their guests.

No, he wasn’t really worried. Still, he wished he could listen in on the call.

When he was finished putting the plates and utensils in the dishwasher and storing the leftovers in the refrigerator, he returned to the dining room to find that Jones had spread the files out on the table. Diana was in the living room, on the phone.

“So,” said Neal, sliding into his seat and rubbing his hands together, “where do we begin?”

Jones eyed him a moment, then turned his attentions to the piles he had made.

“These here on this side are virgin mortgage fraud cases.” He waved his hand to his left.

“Virgin?” asked Neal.
“Relatively new. No one has done anything on them yet, aside from assemble the file and gather some basic information. I thought it might be good to get you on some of those early, in case you have ideas about where we should go looking for evidence.”

Neal nodded. “Virgin. Okay.”

“These in the middle are older cases. They’ve gone a little stale, hit dead ends, etc. Like the ones you were dealing with in the office on Monday.”

“You mean the ones I solved in record time?” asked Neal. He smirked, and Jones rolled his eyes.

“Yes, those,” said Jones. “And then I also picked up a handful of new cases that I thought Peter might be interested in pursuing once…” he trailed off and dropped his eyes.

“Once this mess with me is settled,” said Neal. “It’s okay, you can say it.”

“Whatever,” said Jones. “ Anyway, take your pick.”

Neal surveyed the table. “How much do you want to bet I can solve all of these old cases today, and work up a plan on the new mortgage fraud ones, too?” He grinned. “How about, if I do, you get me real coffee – from outside the office – for a month?”

“Not a chance,” said Jones.

Neal shrugged. “If you’re too scared to lose, just say so,” he said. “Seriously, though…you’ll probably have to come back tomorrow with more.”

“I should call first next time,” muttered Jones.

“What?” asked Neal. He had heard what Jones had said, but he didn’t understand it.

Jones cleared his throat. “Tomorrow’s Saturday,” said Jones. “You can take the day off. These kinds of cases will still be here on Monday.”

Neal picked up one of the old case files, traced his finger around the outside. “Sure,” he said. “I just want to…you know. Be as useful as I can be. Before next week.” He glanced up, and saw Jones’ expression soften slightly.

“You think the more cases you solve, the more likely the arbitrator will decide you have value,” said Jones.

“Something like that.” Neal opened the file. “Ooh, Park Avenue. This one looks juicy. Maybe we could take a field trip, check out the property.”

“Hey,” said Jones. Neal looked up. “I just want you to know…I basically think that if you do the crime, you should do the time. But I don’t agree with these laws that make people property.”

“Oh,” said Neal. “Well…”

“I’m just saying, I don’t think that whether someone has a right to live should have anything to do with some arbitrary ‘value’ that they are deemed to have to society. So…I wanted you to know that.” Jones glanced away, looking decidedly uncomfortable.

“Thanks, Clinton,” said Neal. He paused, and then, in an attempt to lighten the mood, he forced a grin on to his face. “And here I didn’t think you liked me much.”
Jones picked up his glass and took a long drink of water. “I don’t know you,” he said, finally. “And I don’t trust you. That’s not the same as not liking you.”

Neal blinked at him. That was a little more intense than he had hoped this conversation would go, and he shifted in his chair. He wasn’t surprised that Jones didn’t trust him – hell, Peter didn’t trust him – but it still wasn’t fun to hear.

“That’s too bad,” said Neal. “Because I trust you.”

“You do?” Jones sounded like he didn’t believe it for a second.

“I trust that you’ll do the upstanding thing. And I trust that you’re loyal to Peter. Since I trust Peter, that trust extends to you.” Neal sat back, waiting to see what Jones would make of that. “Am I wrong that you’re loyal?”

“You’re not wrong,” said Jones. “But you should try to remember that I’m loyal to Peter. That means that I’ll always act in Peter’s interests, even if that means acting against yours. If I think you’re going to screw things up for him, I won’t hesitate to do something about it.”

“I wouldn’t expect anything less,” said Neal.

“Because at the end of the day, Caffrey, I think you’re always going to look out for yourself. Even if it means Peter gets hurt.”

The look Jones was giving him was very pointed, and Neal couldn’t quite get a read on it. Was he supposed to? What had he done – aside from put Peter’s finances in jeopardy, his job in jeopardy, his wife in jeopardy…okay, maybe Jones was right.

“I can promise you that I don’t want Peter to get hurt any more than you do,” said Neal.

“No, I don’t think you do. Now. But I think that might change if your interests diverge. Am I wrong?” asked Jones, echoing Neal’s earlier question.

“Maybe,” said Neal. “I guess we’ll have to wait and see. But you’re right. You’ve got no reason to trust me.” Neal said the last more to himself than to Jones. But Jones answered.

“Yet,” he said.

“Yet?”

“Given time, if you prove you can be trusted, then that might change. I might even end up liking you.” He smiled.

“If we have time,” said Neal.

“We will.”

“You think we’ll be successful next week?” Neal hated the desperate way his voice rose, as if grasping for the hope that Jones was offering.

“I do,” said Jones. “And if not next week, ultimately. Come on, Caffrey. Have you ever know Peter Burke to not get his man?”

Neal laughed. “No, that’s one thing we can be sure of…he doesn’t quit until he wins.”

“Neither do you,” said Jones. “You two have that in common. It’s the thing about you that makes
me think you’ll be an asset to us. You seem to have this uncanny ability to get what you want.”

“I don’t know about that,” said Neal. “I didn’t want to get caught and end up in prison.”

“Didn’t you?” Neal peered at Jones in surprise, and Jones shook his head. “Come on, Caffrey. I was around and on the team by then. You’re a smart guy. You can’t tell me you didn’t know you were walking into a trap.”

Neal considered how to respond, and settled on his old friend, deflection. “If I knew it was a trap, why would I have gone?”

“In theory, you went because you couldn’t find Kate, and when you got word she was at that storage locker, you couldn’t resist the chance to see her.”

“That does sound like me,” said Neal. “I had been looking for her for a long while.”

“See, here’s the thing,” said Jones, tapping his fingers on the table. “You could have sent your weird little friend – or any number of hired people – to check things out first, or get her a message and be watching from the wings. You didn’t have to walk in there in the middle of the day.”

“Maybe I was afraid she’d run if she got wind I knew where she was.”

“Or maybe…” Jones sighed. “Never mind.”

“No,” said Neal. “Say what’s on your mind. Since we’re bonding and all.”

Jones shot him a look, but sighed. “Maybe you got exactly what you wanted. A chance to reconnect with Kate and also a chance to get a face-to-face with Peter.”

Neal’s mouth dropped open. “I was up on a ton of counts for dozens of crimes because of that arrest,” said Neal. “I’ll give you that I enjoyed the cat and mouse game Peter and I were playing, but why in the world would I risk a lifetime in jail just for a ‘face-to-face’?”

“You were only convicted on the counts associated with the bond forgery,” said Jones.

“So?”

“So…that same bond forgery was the case that made you aware of each other. I always thought it was awfully convenient that so much evidence on the other crimes was circumstantial. The only thing we had you cold on was the bonds.”

Neal stared at Jones. After a minute, he burst out laughing. “So, hang on a second. You’re saying you think I designed a plan to separate from Kate so you guys could find her and leak her location to me, so that I could get caught by Peter, get convicted – but only for one crime – just so I could…what? Have a chance to interact with the agent who was tracking me down?”

Jones shrugged. “Know your enemy, right?” he said. “Besides, it’s no secret about how you kept in touch with him while you were at the Work Camp. Or his keeping track of you.”

That brought Neal up short. “Peter…kept track of me?” he asked.

“You could set your watch by the way he called the prison every other month to get his special report on you. He had an alarm, but he never needed it. We knew not to bother him at 10:30AM the last Wednesday of alternating months.” Jones paused, and squinted at Neal. “You didn’t know about that?”
Neal stared at Jones. “No,” he whispered.

He licked his lips, trying to make sense of what Jones was telling him. All that time. All those months, while Neal was creating cards and buying clever gifts to send to Peter...Peter was keeping tabs on him, too?

He hadn’t realized it went both ways, even then.

Neal shook off the fog that was threatening to envelop him. Jones was watching him curiously, so he plastered on a cocky grin. Or, at least, what he hoped was a cocky grin.

“I didn’t know, but...I should have guessed,” said Neal. “He *is* sort of obsessed with me.”

“Riiiight,” said Jones. “That’s what it is.”

Diana chose that moment to reenter the dining room, sliding her phone back in her pocket.

“We got the warrant,” she said. “We should have the security footage from the Plaza in a couple of hours. In the meantime, put me to work.”

Neal gestured at the table. “Pick a file, any file,” he said. “I’ll race you.”

She grinned at him. “That’s my kind of competition. Come on, Jones, get the lead out. We can’t let him solve a case before we do.”

Neal turned his attention back to the file in front of him. “So that’s a ‘no’ on the field trip to Park Avenue, then?” he asked.

* WC – WC – WC – WC – WC – WC – WC *

Friday, July 2, 1:45PM

Upstairs, Peter paced his bedroom.

He was ready to call El. He was. He just...needed a second to figure out what he was going to say, exactly.

He had a slightly better idea of that than he had had that morning, anyway. Now that he knew she had talked to Neal and basically approved the entire situation. Still, she had been his wife for ten years, and neither of them had ever even considered straying. He hadn’t anyway, and he was fairly certain she hadn’t either.

Finally, he gave up trying to plan it out, and simply hit her contact information to place the call.

She answered right away.

“Hey, hon,” she said.

“Hey, hon,” he replied.

There was a beat of silence. He tried to figure out what to say next. After a moment, she jumped in, and he was grateful.

“How’s it going?” she asked. “Everything okay?”

Did she sound...like she knew what he was calling about? He wasn’t sure.
“Everything’s great,” he said. “How’s your sister? How’s Satchmo?”

“We’re good,” she said.

More silence. This was unusual, he couldn’t help but note. They didn’t sit on the phone in silence, as a rule. It was…awkward.

“So,” he said.

“So,” she said.

Then they both laughed.

“Wow, he’s that good, is he?” she asked, amusement coloring her tone.

“I…what are you talking about?” he sputtered.

“He…Neal…hmmm.” She paused, and then cleared her throat. “Sorry, I’m just…I thought you maybe…how is Neal?”

She did know. He closed his eyes. She knew, and she wasn’t mad. He hadn’t thought he had been nervous, not really, but here he was, so relieved his knees were weak. He sank onto the bed.

“He’s…Neal,” said Peter. “He’s okay. Says he’s fine, isn’t, but is managing. I got him to talk to me this morning, tell me about Friedrich. He’s still holding back, but he opened up, and we got through it.”

“I’m glad,” she said. “Hon, you think you might…I think Neal…” she trailed off.

Peter decided to rescue her. “He told me he talked to you.”

“He told you…oh. Yes, he called this morning. To apologize. Did he…”

“El. He told me what you talked about.”

Silence again, and then she sighed. “Peter, please don’t be angry with him,” she said. “Listen, I’m the one who brought it up. He did not call me to ask my permission. I offered it freely. So if you’re going to be upset—“

“I’m not upset,” he said.

“You’re not…oh. Then…how did it come up? Did you…” she sighed again. “Oh, for the love of…Peter. Will you just take that boy to bed already and stop torturing us all?”

Peter burst out laughing. “El,” he said. “I can’t…you are an amazing person. Do you know that? I don’t know anyone else whose wife would say something like that to them.”

“Yeah, I’m one in a million. So? Will you?”

Peter grinned into the phone. “I can’t believe you’d be okay with that,” he said. “That you’d encourage it. I can’t possibly be that lucky.”

“So you do want him that way,” said El.

Peter froze. Maybe she hadn’t really been sure he would, and now that it was confirmed, she would change her mind.
“I…” he trailed off. “Hon, I can’t explain it. He’s just…I feel like…when he’s around I’m…”

He couldn’t put words together. No matter what he tried, it didn’t seem to make sense.

“Listen,” he tried again, his voice urgent. “This changes nothing. Nothing. I love you like I’ve always loved you. Just tell me no, and the answer is no. He’ll be okay with that, I know he will. He told me as much.”

“Oh, hon,” she said. “I know you love me. I know that hasn’t changed. Remember the other night, I told you it was possible to love more than one thing with all your heart at the same time? I wasn’t just talking about your job. I was talking about Neal.”

His breath caught in his throat. “El, I don’t love Neal. This is just…I care about him. And somehow, part of that is this need to…I think it’s more about comfort and…taking care of him, than anything else.”

She was quiet for a moment. “Okay,” she said quietly. “Whatever it is…it doesn’t change anything about us. You’re not planning on divorcing me, right?”

“No! No. Of course not.”

“Then…I want you to be happy. I want you to have what you need. Right now, you need Neal.”

He thought about it. They sat, on either end of the line, listening to each other’s quiet thoughtfulness.

“I think I do,” he said. “Right now, I think I do need him. Or…I need to be there for him.”

“Then do that,” she said. “And promise me you won’t worry about us. I’m not going anywhere.”

“I don’t deserve you,” he said.

“You do,” she replied. “But the fact that you think you don’t is precisely what convinces me that you do. Give Neal a kiss for me, be there for him. When I get back, we’ll all have a talk.”

“Okay,” he whispered.

“Peter…is something else bothering you?” she asked.

He scrubbed a hand over his face. “Maybe.” Deciding that there was no one else he could ask for advice on the matter, he explained his misgivings, starting with his concern that Neal wasn’t in a position to really know what he wanted or why. “I’m just worried that he’ll wake up one day and realize that he only did this because he felt trapped, and that…he’ll hate me for it.”

“Hmmm. Well, I understand your concerns,” she said. “But, hon…this isn’t new for him. He’s been mad about you as long as you’ve been mad about him.”

“Which is how long, exactly?” he asked dryly. “I thought I just figured this out today.”

“Right, you just figured it out. But it’s been going on for years. For both of you. Trust me.”

“I do,” he said. “Neal told me that, too. It just…it doesn’t seem right. It seems like I’m taking advantage of him.”

“I don’t think you are,” she said. “How about this? If he told you he didn’t want to be in this sort of relationship with you anymore, what would you do?”
“Back off, of course,” he said.

“Would it change anything else?”

“No.”

“Then…you just have to put your faith in your own ability to know what you want and his ability to know what he wants. Keep checking in. We all should, in fact. When I get back, we’ll sit down and have a chat. Figure out how this is going to work. Make sure everything is clear and out in the open.”

Peter sighed. “El, I love you,” he said.

He could practically hear her smiling through the phone. “I love you, too. Hon.”

“I should get back downstairs, save Neal from Jones.”

“Have fun,” said Elizabeth. “Let me know when I can come home. I miss you both.”

“Miss you, too.”

After a few more rounds of goodbyes, he hung up. Time to get back downstairs. Jones could be a taskmaster, and Neal was still recovering. From everything.

His palms tingled, itching to touch the kid again. More. For real. How soon could he hustle his team out the door and get Neal to himself?
Chapter Summary

One last round of obstacles and then...

Chapter Notes

Here's the second half of what was originally a monster chapter.

Next up is the promised land...I've got a bunch of work to do and want to get it absolutely right, so please be patient. I promise I won't leave you hanging too long.

Chapter 34: Tension, Part 4

Friday, July 2, 2:43PM

Neal had his nose buried in a set of property records when Peter finally came back down the stairs. He tried not to look up, but couldn’t resist a peek through his eyelashes.

Peter’s face was passive, pleasant.

What did that mean? Did it mean the call with Elizabeth had gone...well? What did “gone well” mean?

Neal was going to drive himself crazy, so he looked back at the property records. There was something off about them, and he was going to focus on finding it, and not on Peter.

That plan went well until Peter slid into the chair beside him. Neal could feel his presence, as if he were radiating little sparks of electricity that landed on whatever parts of Neal were closest.

“So,” said Peter brightly. “Catch me up.”

“We got the warrant,” said Diana. “I’m waiting for the word that the surveillance footage is in, and then I’ll head back and take a look, see what I can see. I also put in a request for a full summary of Friedrich’s financial interests. I’ve got a couple of agents pulling that together, and I thought we could start there, see if Neal recognized anything.”

“Good,” said Peter.

“Neal and I were digging into these case files,” said Jones.

“Great. Any progress yet?”

Neal leaned back in his chair, a smirk on his face. “Well,” he said, gesturing at the stack of papers in front of him, “this property on Park Avenue seems to have been sold three times in the past year. Which seems excessive, especially since the signatures on all three deeds are identical.”
“What?” said Jones. He leaned over, squinting at the pages. “Those are three different names.”

“Yeah, but they were signed by the same person.”

“How do you know?” asked Diana.

Neal explained about markers and indicators. “I can’t prove it – yet – but I guarantee the same person signed all three of these. The question is why? And who?”

He glanced over at Peter, and saw Peter beaming at him. Next thing he knew, Peter’s hand had settled on Neal’s thigh.

Neal froze.

“Excellent,” said Peter. “Let’s figure it out.”

He slid his hand further up and squeezed slightly. Neal felt himself getting hard, and swallowed, trying to talk himself back down. He stared at Peter, and Peter winked.

_Bastard._

Well, two could play at that game.

Neal picked up a page of notes, and pushed it over to Peter. “These are the three names on the deeds,” he said. “I’m betting they’re either fake identities or dead people. That’s the easiest,” he explained. “Taking a dead person’s identity is quicker than creating an alias from scratch. But either way, there will be tells in the records. If we can get them, I can find out who is behind it.”

Neal waited for Peter to lean forward and pick up the paper. Then he took his own hand and placed it on Peter’s thigh, right next to his groin. Instead of squeezing, he drew small circles with his fingers, tracing higher and higher until—

Peter pushed his chair back and stood. “Diana, why don’t you take this back to the office and get started on running these names down. That way when the surveillance comes in, you’ll be ready for it.”

“Will do,” said Diana, getting to her feet. “Anyone mind if I snag the extra pastrami sandwich for a snack?”

“Go for it,” said Peter. She hustled into the kitchen.

“Should I stay, or should I head back?” asked Jones. His gaze darted back and forth between Peter and Neal. “If you two wanted to work alone, I could—“

“Sure,” said Peter.

“Stay,” said Neal.

Peter whipped his head around to look at Neal, narrowing his eyes. Neal gave him a pleasant smile, and turned back to Jones.

“The more the merrier,” said Neal. “There are a lot of cases here, and between the three of us, we should make some good headway. Don’t you think, Peter?”

Peter stared at Neal a moment, an odd expression on his face, as if he was trying to figure Neal out. Neal just smiled back.
What was Neal doing? Peter watched him carefully, looking for some hint of truth in his mask of easygoing pleasantness.

Had he changed his mind? No, because he had just been teasing Peter under the table. So what was he playing at?

Diana re-entered the room. “Thanks for the pastrami,” she said. “Best in the city, and that says a lot.” She snagged her bag. “I’ll let you know what I find.”

“Thanks, Diana,” said Peter, not taking his eyes off Neal. He heard Jones say goodbye, heard Diana’s footsteps as she crossed through the living room, heard the front door open and close. Neal continued to smile pleasantly, not dropping his gaze.

After a moment, Jones moved a file, letting it hit the table with a sharp thwap.

Peter and Neal both glanced at him.

“Sorry,” he said. He looked between them. “Something wrong with you two?”

“No,” said Neal.

“Neal,” said Peter. “I’d like to speak with you a moment. In the kitchen.”

Neal’s eyes widened, but he shrugged. “Be back in two shakes, Jones. Go ahead and get started on the next one without me, but don’t strain yourself.”

Jones snorted.

Neal smirked at Peter and then headed for the kitchen. Peter may have been imagining it, but he could swear he saw Neal wiggle his ass right before he pushed open the door and disappeared through it.

“Peter?” Jones spoke up.

Peter was halfway to the kitchen door before he registered that Jones had said something and turned back. “Yeah?”

Jones stared at him, then shook his head. “Never mind,” he said.

Peter didn’t waste time wondering what that had been about, and pushed through into the kitchen. Neal was leaning up against the counter, head tilted to one side, arms folded across his chest.

“Am I in trouble?” he asked.

“Do you want to be?” asked Peter, surprising himself.

He was even more surprised when Neal’s eyes widened and his lips parted. Peter moved closer, liking the way Neal’s pupils dilated with every step. When he was standing right in front of the kid, Neal wet his lips.

“I think…maybe,” he whispered. “Shit, Peter…”
Peter descended, his lips claiming Neal’s with an initial burst of fierceness. But he gentled the pressure immediately, preferring the way it made Neal shiver, as if he was restraining himself, desperately hanging on to a tiny thread of control. He placed his hands on Neal’s shoulders to steady him, then slid one around to the back of his neck and the other slowly down his chest.

Neal shifted forward, moving into Peter’s touch, winding his own arms around Peter’s waist and opening up for him with a freedom that made Peter smile against his lips.

Peter let his hand slide lower, brushing over the waistband of Neal’s pants, pausing for a half second before he searched for what he knew he would find inches below. He traced his fingers around the outline of Neal’s cock, which was just beginning to spring to attention. Neal’s breath hitched, and his hips twitched.

Peter smiled again.

“See, this makes me wonder…” Peter murmured, separating his mouth from Neal’s just barely enough to speak. He liked the way it felt when his breath ricocheted back at him, caged between them. “Why would you tell Jones to stay when he offered to go?”

Neal closed the distance and captured Peter’s mouth again, effectively taking control of the moment. Peter allowed it, letting Neal push him backwards until his back thudded against the wall next to the door. He reveled in the feel of Neal’s tongue sliding against his own, Neal’s hips barely making contact with his, a mere promise of things to come. He let himself get lost in the sensations, not caring about anything beyond the little bubble that encircled them.

Which is why he felt suddenly adrift when Neal pushed away, taking several steps backward.


Peter wrinkled his nose. “I don’t…what are you talking about?” he asked. He pushed off the wall, taking a step forward and reaching out, but froze in his tracks when Neal held up his hands.

“Wait,” said Neal. “Just…” he sighed, and edged farther away to the other side of the kitchen.

“Neal?” Peter hated the tone of his voice, the thin neediness of it. But he had to know what was wrong, why Neal was pulling away. It scared him, a little. Twelve hours ago he had had no idea—or, he wasn’t conscious of it, anyway—that he felt this way about his convict. Now…

“I thought Jones should stay because…he’s a good buffer,” said Neal. “Between us.”

Peter felt a chill run down his spine, never mind that he had thought the same thing when his agents had arrived earlier. That their presence would allow them to slow things down, make sure they were on steady ground. Hearing Neal say it was different, because Peter knew what it meant.

He knew it. He knew Neal would eventually regret anything between them. He just hadn’t thought it would happen so…fast. He hated it, but he had promised himself he would let Neal take the lead, and so that’s what he was going to do. He swallowed back the bitter taste that was trickling down the sides of his mouth and vowed to accept it.

“Listen,” said Peter. “I told you. Just say the word and we’re back to where we were. I promise. I wouldn’t—”

“It’s not that,” said Neal. “God, Peter…no. I’m not…I don’t want…” he rolled his eyes. “Look, it is taking every ounce of willpower I have to stand over here and not to run over there and climb you like a tree.”
Peter let out a surprised laugh. “A tree?” His knees shook with relief. So…Neal wasn’t changing his mind?

“Don’t worry, you’re a very attractive tree. But what I mean is that if Jones leaves, what’s to stop us from dragging each other upstairs and…I’m assuming you talked to Elizabeth?”

Peter nodded. “I did.”

“And?”

“And it’s fine,” he said. “Go on, you were talking about dragging me upstairs, and I’d like to see where that was headed.”

Neal laughed. “We can’t. There’s too much…if we go now, think about it. How you feel, how you’ve been acting all afternoon. When will we be ready to come back downstairs and work on cases?”

“The cases can go to hell,” said Peter. He had never meant anything more. “They’re just mortgage fraud. They’re a dime a dozen, and they’ll be there whenever.”

“But right now, it’s good if I solve a bunch of them. And I can’t…we’re not going to get any work done if Jones leaves.” Neal looked away, running a hand through his hair. “I have to…we have to solve some of those cases first, okay?”

Peter paused. He thought he understood what was going on. He took a step towards Neal, and Neal tensed, as if he was planning on running. Peter held up his hands.

“I’m not going to attack you,” he said. “I just want…” He moved closer, Neal watching him warily. When he was within reach, he grabbed Neal’s hand and tugged him close, tucking Neal’s head under his chin and wrapping his arms around the kid’s still-too-thin frame.

After a moment, Neal relaxed, turning his face into Peter’s neck and breathing deeply.

“You want to be useful,” said Peter. He felt Neal nod, and it broke his heart. “Okay,” he said. “Jones can stay. You can be the brilliant conman forger thief who will blow every field office’s conviction rates out of the water. And then, when Jones leaves…you can just be you. With me. Deal?”

“Deal,” murmured Neal.

Peter tightened his arms. He was amazed that, a few minutes earlier, he had been consumed by lust. At the moment, all he wanted was for Neal to feel safe and cared for. It was enough to give him whiplash.

“Let’s go back in there before Jones thinks we fell down the garbage disposal,” he said.

For now, he’d follow Neal’s lead. Let the kid do things that made him feel better about their chances next week. There would be time for the rest later.

* WC – WC – WC – WC – WC – WC – WC *

Friday, July 2, 6:42PM

Neal scribbled down figures on a legal pad, muttering under his breath. He knew that, somewhere between these seven accounts, he was going to find the path that the missing funds had taken
before they ended up paying for a property upstate.

He dimly heard Peter and Jones talking, and he wished they’d shut up for a bit. He was considering taking the file upstairs to his room. If he could just focus on these numbers for a minute, he knew he’d be able to see the pattern.

There…that deposit is one-third of the withdrawal…there. And then…this one is exactly half…

The doorbell rang, and Neal let out a curse.

Peter and Jones glanced at him, surprised.

“Sorry,” he said. “I almost had something and now it…went.”

“It’s probably the pizza,” said Peter. He pushed up from the table and headed for the front door.

“We ordered pizza?” asked Neal.

Jones looked at him with barely concealed amusement. “You really concentrate, don’t you? It’s kind of impressive, I’ll give you that.”

An indignant voice – one Neal knew well – carried through the house. Neal sighed and stood.

“Come in, Mozzie,” he called out.

“I don’t know if I should,” shouted Mozzie from the front stoop. “There is clearly a higher than normal presence of suits in this house.”

Neal ignored Jones’s snickering and went to rescue Peter from his friend.

“And I don’t know why I should set foot in the house of the man who didn’t bother to tell me that Neal had been released from the hospital,” said Mozzie. “Or really, why I should even want to see Neal when he refuses to pick up his phone –“

“If you don’t want to come in, then get off my stoop,” said Peter.

Neal reached them just as Peter looked ready to slam the door in Mozzie’s face. He slid in front of Peter, placing a hand on the door.

“Moz,” he said. “I’m glad you came by. Come in, we’re expecting pizza.”

“You’re trying to kill me now, I see,” said Mozzie, but he finally stepped through the door.

“Lactose,” he shouted at Jones, who was watching from the dining room.

“You can pick off the cheese,” said Neal. He shot an apologetic glance at Peter, who was pursing his lips in a not-quite-frown of exasperation.

Mozzie looked around, and then he narrowed his eyes at Peter. “I need to talk to Neal. Alone,” he said.

Peter laughed. “That’s funny,” he said. “Because I could swear I heard you imply that I should leave my own living room, which can’t be the case, because—“

“We’ll go upstairs,” said Neal, grabbing Mozzie’s shoulder and dragging him in that direction. Sorry, he mouthed at Peter, and made a face for good measure. He was slightly relieved to see Peter’s features relax into mild amusement.
Once they were in Neal’s room with the door securely closed, Mozzie whirled on Neal and jabbed a finger in his face.

“What the hell, Neal?” he said. “I’ve been calling you all day. Are you ignoring me now? That’s nice. Traded me in for a more connected model?”

Neal glanced over at the nightstand, where his new burner phone sat, facedown, uncharged.

“I’m sorry, Moz,” he said. “It’s been a crazy couple of days. I don’t even think that phone has any power right now, and I just…I wasn’t thinking about it.”

He crossed to the nightstand and picked up the phone, pressed the buttons. Sure enough, the screen stayed black. He rummaged around for a charger and plugged it in. When he turned back to Mozzie, his friend was eyeing him warily.

“The suit been keeping too close tabs on you?” he asked. “Not letting you off the leash?”

“There’s no leash. Jesus, Mozzie, I was busy. Calm down.”

Mozzie didn’t immediately reply. Instead, he set his messenger bag carefully on the bed, then reached down and picked up the bundle of restraints that Peter must have collected and tossed in the corner. He threw the restraints on the bed beside his bag, and started sorting through them.

“Cuffs. A chest harness. This looks like…an arm binder, nice and snug. What do we have here…a hood…”

Neal watched as Mozzie took each item and flipped it to the side with disgust. He went cold at the sight of the hood. He hadn’t seen all of these. Peter had said the Court sent over the required restraints, but the only thing he had worn so far was the arm binder. And the chest harness, last night on the way home from the hospital, with the—

“And oh, look. What is this? A leash.” Mozzie held up the offending item, and then let it slither through his fingers on top of the rest of the pile. “All fairly high quality. The suit must think highly of his new pet.”

Neal tried to make his voice as even and reasonable as possible. “Mozzie. Come on. The Court sent all that over. It was the deal Peter struck to get the judge to agree to let me stay in his custody until the arbitration. He’s not making me wear them.”

Mozzie raised his eyebrows.

“Well, on the way home from the hospital, he used the harness and leash, but that was because it was part of the Court order. We were in public. There was no choice. I was fine with it.” He ran a hand through his hair. And the arm binder, but he wasn’t about to bring that up, especially since Mozzie didn’t know about their sleeping arrangements. “I haven’t even seen most of that stuff. Peter’s breaking the law by not making me wear it. I’m probably supposed to be in cuffs right now, supervised, and instead I’m up here, alone, talking to you.”

“This,” Mozzie snapped, waving his hand over the items, “is not Court issue. Court issue would be low-cost. Effective, but uncomfortable. These were designed for comfort.”

Neal waved that away. “The point is, I’m not a pet.”

“No? Then explain again why you’re here, and not in the wind, like you could have been if you had run with my help the other night. Hmm?” Mozzie folded his arms across his chest and pouted.
“You wanted to wait for your master to give you the command.”

“Mozzie—“

“How about we go now? He’s distracted, you’re not in a collar. We can sneak out, be miles away before he notices.”

Neal stared at Mozzie. No amount of explaining was going to work, he could see that. He planted his left foot on the bed and hiked up his pant leg, displaying the ankle monitor with its blinking green light. Mozzie gaped.

“No,” he said. “You’re not a pet. You’re just a slave.”

“I’m here because I want to be here. Are you listening to me? I don’t want to run right now.” Neal dropped his foot to the floor. “Can you give me a fucking break? I’m tired. A month ago I was…it was…hell. A week ago I thought it was all over for me. Since then, I’ve been nearly hit by a car, got electrocuted by a shock collar, and pumped so full of morphine I fucking died. If it wasn’t for Peter—“

“Hold on a second,” said Mozzie. He leaned forward, waving his hands. “You died? When?”

Neal stopped, thought about it. “Two nights ago. The same night you tried to get me to leave the hospital.”

“You didn’t…no one told me.”

“Oh. Mozzie, it wasn’t…you’re right. I should have called. It’s just been…”

“Right. You’ve been busy.” Mozzie sounded so defeated that Neal couldn’t help but move around the bed to his side. He placed a hand on Mozzie’s shoulder.

“I should have called,” he said, quietly. “But I’m okay. Because of Peter. He saved my life, once again.”

“It was morphine?” asked Mozzie. “The hospital industrial complex is never to be trusted. They let anyone near those medications.”

“Actually, it wasn’t the hospital’s fault. Not entirely. Friedrich sent a man in to take me out.” Mozzie’s eyebrows flew up. “A hit?” he asked. “Wow, you’re really moving up in the world.”

Neal laughed. “That’s one way to spin it,” he said.

“Okay,” said Mozzie. “I suppose since there’s a contract on your life, you have a small excuse for not remembering to charge your phone.”

“We good, then?” asked Neal. When Mozzie nodded after a moment’s hesitation, Neal relaxed.

He sank onto the bed, shoving the pile of restraints to the side. Fatigue was creeping in, and he wished he could stretch out and sleep for a while.

“What did you need to talk to me about?” he asked. “What was so urgent that you’d risk showing up here with two agents in the house?”

Mozzie’s face lit up. “Aha,” he said. “I have news.”
“News?” Neal stiffened. What could Mozzie have news about, except—

“News about Kate,” said Mozzie.

Neal’s stomach dropped. That wasn’t right, he thought. He should feel a thrill of excitement to get news of the woman he loved, not a sense of foreboding.

“Well?” he asked.

Mozzie reached for his messenger bag. “So I got to Monday this morning, after taking a quick constitutional around Central Park – you know, a lot of people walk and run in Central Park these days, and a lot of them have dogs—"

“Moz,” said Neal.

“Right,” said Mozzie. He rummaged around in the bag, and then grinned. “When I got to Monday, I found this hiding in the fern next to the door.”

With a flourish, he pulled out a long, dark object. Neal gasped.


Mozzie grinned and handed it over. Neal took it, feeling its solid weight, tracing his fingers over the place where the label met the cool glass. There were so many memories associated with this bottle, both good and bad.

After a few minutes lost in his thoughts, he looked up to see Mozzie watching him.

“You think she left this?” he asked, trying to keep himself from getting his hopes up.

Mozzie shrugged. “Who else would have?” he asked.

“But why?”

“Your guess is as good as mine. Could it be a message?”

Neal considered that. If the bottle was a message, then it could really only mean one thing: goodbye. Right? That bottle had symbolized their dreams, the fantasies they spun about their future life together. If she was leaving it behind, then…she was leaving them behind.

“I don’t know,” said Neal.

“One positive thing, if you wish to see it that way,” said Mozzie, “is that if she left it, that means she’s okay. She’s not…in trouble, like you thought she might be.”

“Right. Positive,” said Neal. Of course, if she wasn’t in trouble, then she had gone looking for his stash herself, truly betraying him. He wasn’t ready to believe that, not really. “Or, someone could have left it for her, or made her leave it.”

“So…we’re back where we started, then?” asked Mozzie.

“Maybe. Maybe not,” said Neal. “Let me think about it. We might be missing something.”

“Are you going to share it with him?” asked Mozzie.

“Him meaning Peter? I…don’t know yet.” Neal stood and went to the dresser, where he pulled out
a plain white t-shirt, then went to the closet. He slid open the door and pulled down a couple of boxes from the top shelf.

He hesitated. If he hid the bottle, then he was hiding it. From Peter. He was doing exactly the kind of thing that made Peter not entirely trust him, exactly the kind of thing he swore he wouldn’t do.

But if he told Peter…

On the one hand, if he told Peter, Peter had promised to help him find Kate. So maybe Peter would have some ideas about how to find out if Kate had left the bottle. Maybe he could get some of that infamous security footage that they seemed to always be able to find, from somewhere around Mozzie’s safehouse and they could track her.

Then again, that would require telling Peter about Mozzie’s safehouse, and Mozzie might actually kill him for doing that.

Besides…on the other hand, if he told Peter about the bottle, it would remind Peter that Neal was still looking for her, that he still loved her and wanted to find her. Neal wasn’t sure he wanted Peter to think too hard about that, just when they were about to start whatever they were about to start.

He wanted this thing with Peter. He would even go so far as to say he needed it. He had no intention of doing anything to jeopardize it.

So…what would jeopardize it more? Telling Peter about the bottle, or hiding it?

“What are you doing?” asked Mozzie.

I don’t know, thought Neal desperately.

Just then, he heard Peter’s voice calling his name, footsteps on the stairs. Quickly, without thinking any further, he rolled the bottle in the t-shirt, shoved it way back on the shelf in the closet, and put the boxes back in place. He’d find a better hiding place later. Or he’d tell Peter later. Right now wasn’t the best time, either way.

Closing the door to the closet, he put his fingers over his lips, and Mozzie nodded. Was it Neal’s imagination, or did Mozzie seem pleased that Neal was keeping something from Peter?

There was a knock on the door. Neal shot Mozzie a glance with raised eyebrows, as if to say, see? He knocks.

He opened the door.

“Pizza’s here,” said Peter. “Are you guys coming down, or do you have more nefarious plots to devise?”

“Not every plot is nefarious, Suit,” said Mozzie, turning up his nose. “Some of them are downright…farious.”

“I’m pretty sure that’s not a word,” said Peter. “You planning on joining us for dinner?”

“My work here is done,” said Mozzie. “Neal, keep your phone on. Suit, just remember…I’m watching you.” He poked a finger at Peter’s chest on his way out the door.

Peter watched him go. “What did he mean, he’s watching me?” he asked. “Neal, if he put up spy cams in my house—“
“He’s just trying to get under your skin, Peter,” said Neal. “Come on, I’m starved, and I want to finish solving that case for you.”

He patted Peter’s cheek on his way past, and didn’t miss the soft chuckle in response.

* WC – WC – WC – WC – WC – WC – WC *


Friday, July 2, 9:20PM

Peter shut the front door after saying goodbye to Jones and leaned against it, palms flat against the wood. It was reassuringly solid, and he was exhausted.

The whole day had been draining. From waking up and confronting the highly emotional realization that he was suffering from a forbidden attraction to Neal, to helping Neal tell part of his story about his time with Friedrich, to finding out that maybe the attraction wasn’t completely forbidden, to talking to El, to the excruciating torture of being with Neal and not being able to be with him for hours on end.

Peter pushed away from the door, feeling the surge of a second wind. Or maybe it was a third or tenth wind. Whatever.

Everyone was gone. No more interruptions. That meant…

He shoved his hands in his pockets and turned. Neal was still sitting at the dining table, shoulders hunched over a stack of papers. He muttered softly and scribbled, then scratched things out with a soft curse and began scribbling some more.

Peter smiled. Neal had been working like a fiend all afternoon and evening. They had solved several cold cases, had good leads on several more, and had sent Jones with a stack of the virgin files to distribute to agents with clear investigative instructions. If Neal wanted to demonstrate how “useful” he could be, he was doing that, and then some.

But now it was time for a break.

Peter approached the dining room carefully, not wanting to startle Neal. After dinner, he had asked for some headphones. Peter had scrounged up a set of earbuds from a drawer, and Neal had stuck them in his ears with a disdainful look at Peter and Jones, saying something about needing to concentrate. Peter was pretty sure Neal didn’t even realize Jones had finally left.

He made it all the way to Neal’s side without Neal noticing.

“Neal,” he said. Neal continued to scribble and mutter. Peter raised his voice. “Neal,” he said, again.

When it looked like Neal wasn’t going to hear him without him shouting, Peter reached out and placed a hand lightly on Neal’s shoulder.

Neal jumped, then looked up. Peter didn’t like the lines of exhaustion he saw around Neal’s eyes, or the pale color of his skin. He needed to be getting more rest. For the weekend, they would rest, he decided firmly. He’d make sure of it.

“What?” asked Neal, pulling out one of the earbuds.

“It’s late,” said Peter. “Jones just left. I think you’ve done enough for one day. For twelve days, really.”
Neal nodded. “Yeah. I just want to…I’m close, here, I think. I need a few more minutes.” He started to put the ear bud back in, and Peter squeezed his shoulder.

“Neal. Let’s go to bed.”

“You go ahead,” said Neal. “I’m just—“

“Neal.” Peter smiled and tried again. “Let’s go to bed.”

Neal paused, and then smiled back. “Right,” he said. “Yeah. Good idea.” He pulled out the other earbud and tossed them on the table along with his pencil. “You as dead on your feet as you look?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” said Peter. He released Neal’s shoulder and began walking backward toward the stairs. “I might find some energy somewhere. For something. But if I find myself alone for too long, I might just nod off—“

Neal stood, and Peter was glad to see the cocky little smirk make an appearance. “Guess we can’t let that happen, then,” he said. “Lead the way.”

Trusting Neal was following, Peter turned and headed up the stairs. He tried to leave any doubts he had behind as he went. He wasn’t sure if what he was about to do was a truly epic mistake, or simply inevitable like El had thought, but one thing was for sure: there was no way he was backing out now.
Chapter Summary

It's time.

Chapter Notes

IMPORTANT: This chapter requires trigger warnings. If sexual abuse or non-con are triggers for you, you may want to skip it. Please note that there is no abuse or non-con in real time, but there is allusion to past experiences. Moreover, Neal's experiences here are impacted by what he has gone through in the past. You're probably safe reading the parts in Peter's point of view and skipping the actual sex scene, but every person is different, and there is evidence of this in all parts of this chapter. (I'm also changing the tags to reflect this better.)

Which brings me to say: this isn't a fluffy happy sex scene. That's not to say there is no fluffiness, but it's not smooth sailing. It couldn't be, not for these versions of the characters. They are fighting an uphill battle for happiness, and to give it to them too easily would feel cheap and dishonest to me.

Also, don't go anywhere. This isn't the end of the story. These boys have a lot more to tell me...the arbitration is still ahead!

For everyone who keeps reading and commenting and having faith, THANK YOU. I hope this promised land and what comes after it don't disappoint.

Lastly: forever thanks to my partner in crime for making sure I don't screw this up too badly. You know who you are. Without you as a sounding board and guide, I wouldn't have gotten this far.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter 35: Release

Friday, July 2, 9:45PM

Peter shook out his hand towel and hung it on the rack. He ran a still-damp hand through his hair and examined himself in the mirror.

Dark t-shirt – an old one, so it was soft – that clung to his chest. Pajama pants, nothing special, the same ones he always wore.

He had just shaved. He ran his fingers over his newly smooth cheeks. Maybe shaving was obvious. Was it like he was trying too hard? No, he decided. It wasn’t about his appearance. He had noticed, earlier, some redness around Neal’s mouth after one of their moments, and thought it was probably due to his two-day beard. He didn’t want to make Neal uncomfortable.
He looked tired, that was unavoidable. After the stress of the past ten days, and his forty-eight hours without rest, he hadn’t yet caught up. That would change, with some sleep.

He could probably use a haircut. He thought maybe some parts were sticking up in a weird way, and tried to smooth them down. Eventually, he gave up and sighed.

This was who he was. Neal seemed to like him okay. So far, anyway.

He turned off the light and left the bathroom, heading out into the hall. He stopped and listened. There was water running from inside the other bathroom. The door was closed, and he could see the sliver of light at the bottom. Neal was still in there.

Peter hesitated. Should he go into Neal’s room and wait? Or wait in his own room? Or… something else? He fidgeted, turning one way and then the other, unable to make up his mind.

Just as he had decided to head into Neal’s room, the water shut off and the bathroom door opened. Neal took a step into the hallway and froze.

He recovered quickly, shooting Peter a sheepish smile. “ Didn’t expect to see you standing there,” he said.

“I wasn’t. Standing,” said Peter. “I was just coming from…” he gestured vaguely behind him.

“Okay,” said Neal. They stood and stared at each other for a minute. Neal was the one who broke the silence at last. “So…my place or yours?”

Peter laughed at the way Neal tilted his head suggestively with a sly grin.

“Yours has been working for us so far,” said Peter. “After you.”

Neal led them into his bedroom, but unfortunately, walking through the door didn’t magically make the uncomfortable tension disappear.

Peter paused in the doorway, while Neal crossed to the window, lowered the shade. He swiveled and leaned against the windowsill, his eyes downcast. His bare toes dug into the carpet, gripping and releasing the short fibers.

Peter took some comfort in the fact that Neal was obviously feeling as nervous and awkward as he was.

He took a step forward, and stopped again. “So,” he said.

Neal glanced up, and then away. “Yeah.”

Peter tried to figure out the best way forward. Was he supposed to take the lead? Earlier, in the kitchen, it had felt so natural. Now…now he wasn’t sure if it was appropriate. Shouldn’t he let Neal set the pace? Wasn’t that part of the whole deal? Peter wanted Neal to be the one to decide how things went. That was the only way he would be able to trust that Neal knew he had a choice.

Only, Neal wasn’t doing anything except vibrating on the other side of the room and avoiding Peter’s eyes.

Suddenly, Neal let out a shaky laugh. “Fuck,” he said. “Why is this so weird now, when earlier it was all I could think about?”

Peter relaxed slightly. “Hey,” he said. “It’s okay, you know. If you change your mind, or decide
“No.” Neal’s head shot up, and he finally met Peter’s gaze. “Unless you don’t want…”


“I do.” Neal swallowed, and ducked his head. “It’s not like I haven’t been thinking about this for what feels like forever. But now that it’s here, I’m not sure how to…shift from thinking to doing.”

Peter smiled at Neal’s admission. He had an overwhelming urge to walk across the room and soothe the kid, run his hands over his shoulders and arms until he stilled. Maybe he would. Maybe that would help. But first, there was something he needed to say.

“Neal, listen.” Peter waited for Neal to look up again, and marveled at how deep the blue of his eyes was, even from this distance. “I can be sort of…aggressive. In these types of circumstances. And I want to make sure you know that, even if it seems like I’m being pushy or demanding, that everything is still up to you.”

“Peter—“

“No, I mean it. I need to know that you won’t hesitate to say something if something goes too far, or if you need me to back off a little. Because once we start, I might…well. You saw what happened just before I let Jones in. And then in the kitchen.”

Neal smiled at that. “Yeah,” he said. “That was the goddamned hottest thing.”

“Neal, promise me you’ll speak up. Tell me what you need. I can’t…we can’t do this if I don’t think you will.” Peter clenched a fist. He needed to offer Neal every out he could. Every opportunity to back down. It was crucial.

“I promise, Peter,” said Neal. “I won’t let you do anything I don’t want.”

Peter nodded. “Good.”

There was a beat of silence, and then Neal cleared his throat. “Actually, there is one thing I wanted to…that I want to make sure about before…”

 Anything,“ said Peter. “Just say it.”

Neal blew out a breath. “I’m not comfortable with not having my senses,” he said.

Peter’s brow wrinkled in confusion. He wasn’t sure what Neal was talking about. “Okay,” he said. “I don’t know exactly what you mean, but—“

“The hood, Peter,” he said. He glanced over to the bed.

Peter noticed, for the first time, that the pile of restraints sent over by the Court was in the center of the bed and not in the corner where he had gathered them that afternoon. On top of the pile was a black leather hood, with openings for the nose and a removable cover for the mouth. His stomach dropped. Had Neal thought that he meant to use those things on him? While they were…

“Oh,” he said. “Oh, Neal, I wasn’t intending to—“

“It’s okay if you want to, some of it,” said Neal. “But I just don’t think…I’m not sure how well I’ll handle not being able to see and hear.” He shuddered from head to toe, and squeezed his eyes shut.
Without a word, Peter went to the bed, picked up the entire pile, and left the bedroom. He walked
down the hall to the office, threw the mess inside, and firmly shut the door. When he turned
around, Neal was in the hall behind him.

“There,” he said. “Out of sight, out of mind. Neal, I don’t want to use any of that on you at all, I
told you that. And I never meant for you to think—“

“I saw how you looked at me last night,” Neal interrupted.

Peter closed his eyes. He remembered, too, what it had done to him to see Neal in the arm binder.
He hadn’t reacted that way to the other restraints. But despite the fact that he knew he had some
interest in that area, in the here and now it was totally out of the question.

He opened his eyes and shook his head. “Not a chance,” he said. “There is no way I’d be
comfortable with that. Not in this situation.”

“I’ve done it before,” said Neal. He licked his lips, and looked determined. “I used to enjoy it.”

“That’s fine,” said Peter. “Me too. But right now, there’s too much else complicating this.”

They stared at each other cautiously. Finally, Neal relaxed. “Yeah,” he said. “You’re right.”

He turned and went back into the bedroom. Peter followed, and when he entered the room, Neal
was leaning against the windowsill again. Back to this, then.

Peter wished he could just put his arms around Neal. He was sure, if he did, they would get past
this awkward barrier. That gave him an idea.

“You know what?” he said. Neal glanced up, wary. “Maybe we should just go to bed.”

Neal’s shoulders slumped. “Oh. I guess…if you don’t want…we’re both tired.”

Peter laughed. “No, that’s not what I meant,” he said. “This is all built up now, and that makes it
weird, right?” He gestured between them, and Neal nodded. “So…let’s just do what we usually do.
Let’s get into bed. And then…just see how things go.”

Neal nodded over and over, in that way he had where his entire torso sort of bobbed up and down.
It was Neal’s way of convincing himself that everything was okay, as if he needed to feel the
physical evidence of his assent.

He pushed off of the windowsill and crossed to the bed, not looking at Peter as he lifted the covers
and slid underneath, settling on his left side, facing the window. Peter waited for him to still, then
joined him, turning off the bedside light before scooting all the way down.

He turned onto his side and nudged closer to Neal, trying not to worry that Neal was facing away
from him. That’s how they always started out the night, with Peter wrapped around Neal from
behind. He settled his hips right behind Neal’s, pulled his legs up into a spoon, and slowly moved
his arm until it was curved around Neal’s waist.

This was more intimate than they usually were at first, since Peter’s arm was under and not over
the covers, and was at waist level instead of higher. He cautiously spread his hand out so that his
palm rested on Neal’s stomach. He could feel Neal’s muscles tensing and releasing. He stayed very
still, waiting.

When he felt Neal’s muscles relax finally, he chanced a small movement, a slight scratching of his
fingertips across the soft fabric of Neal’s t-shirt over his abdomen. Neal tensed again, and then let out a shaky breath.

Peter nuzzled into the hair covering Neal’s neck, inhaling deeply, and Neal sighed. He shifted backwards slightly, bringing his ass in full contact with Peter’s groin.

Peter grunted at the movement, and Neal moved again.

Peter chuckled. “Tease,” he said.

Suddenly, Neal twisted and flipped around so that he was face to face with Peter. There was enough moonlight coming in through the edges of the window shade for Peter to see that he was grinning.

“That sounds like a challenge, Agent Burke,” he said.

“I call it like I see it, Caffrey,” said Peter. He stroked his hand up Neal’s spine and then back down. “All those times you snuck into my hotel rooms and left me notes and tokens, just to let me know you had been there? That was you, being a tease.”

“That was me, daring you to catch me,” said Neal. “I mean, it would have been no fun if there wasn’t a chance you might.”

“You were also showing me that you could get to me, even when I couldn’t get to you,” said Peter. “It drove me crazy, knowing you had been there, and I had missed you.”

“Really? How crazy?” Neal wiggled a little as Peter’s hand continued to loop in wide circles across his shoulder blades.

“I used to throw open closet doors, stick my head out of windows, look under the bed, in the shower…those European hotels don’t have security cameras worth a damn, so I could only hope I would catch you while you were still there.”

Peter chuckled at the memory. It was true. Knowing Neal had been in his rooms, selecting a place to leave a note, or a sign that he had visited, made him see stars. He had thought it was frustration, but now…now he thought maybe there were other emotions mixed in.

“You almost did, once,” said Neal.

“I did? When?” Peter’s eyes widened, and he gripped the back of Neal’s shirt.


Peter closed his eyes, trying to picture it. He smiled, as the images flooded in. “It had a pool that I didn’t get to use. And a dining room with white…drapey things.”

Neal laughed. “Yes. I was in Florence because the…well. I was in Florence. I was staying in this beautiful little boutique hotel, in a room with a gorgeous balcony, and as I’m eating my breakfast one morning and checking the paper for news about the…news I might want to know, who should walk in but Agent Peter Burke, in his slightly rumpled suit and all his blustery glory.”

Peter pushed himself up and looked down at Neal, who was looking quite smug.

“Hold on a second. You’re saying you were staying in the same hotel?”

Neal nodded. He reached up, grabbed the neck of Peter’s shirt, and tugged slightly, bringing
Peter’s head back down the pillow. Their noses were practically touching, now.

“Yes,” he whispered. “I hid behind the newspaper, of all things. Like in a fucking movie. I stayed like that until you were distracted by trying to order coffee, and I slipped out the back.”

“I can’t believe you,” said Peter. “But wait a second – I think I only ate breakfast there my first morning, after arriving from the airport. You left me a…what was it in Florence? You left me a refrigerator magnet of a cathedral, along with a notecard. On my pillow. The next day.”

Neal’s eyelashes fluttered as he looked down and then back up. “Well…I had to come back and get my things,” he said. “Before leaving town. And I couldn’t quite resist. So I staked out the lobby and then snuck into your room after I saw you leave.”

“I didn’t know I was so close,” said Peter. “I always thought…that maybe you were just playing with me.”

“I was,” said Neal. “But you were close. Many times. That’s why I had to…that’s why. I guess I wanted you to think you were only close because…” he trailed off.

“Because you let me get close,” murmured Peter. He felt Neal shrug, a silent admission. That was a missing puzzle piece, for sure. He had truly thought that Neal was just being a cocky bastard. And he had been, but it hadn’t been just that. He was saving face, as well.

“It wasn’t always your pillow,” said Neal. “Sometimes I left things in your toiletry bag, or your suitcase.”

“I know,” said Peter. “It always bugged me to think of you rifling around in my things.”

“How else was I supposed to learn about you?” asked Neal. “You had a team of people digging up dirt on me. I had to get my information through other means.”

Peter remembered how he had felt, finding a cheap souvenir tucked in beside his toothbrush, a note in the pocket of his pants. It hadn’t just bugged him. It had thrilled him, knowing Neal had been touching his things. He knew that, at the time, and had chalked it up to the chase. Now, he questioned the true source of that thrill.

“Sometimes I stretched out on your bed,” whispered Neal. “And tried to put myself in your head. What you would think about, staring at the ceiling, or out the window at whatever view you had. What you would see, what it would make you think of. That’s how I would decide what to write, or draw, in the notes.”

“Neal…” Peter swallowed hard, and shifted closer, sliding his nose next to Neal’s. He could feel Neal’s breath, coming out in short, uneven bursts, against his lips. The thought of Neal lying in the beds he had lain in…they had been sharing this space for years. For years, and he hadn’t even realized it.

“Yeah?”

“I can’t wait any longer,” said Peter. “Please let me…”

He moved again, and now his lips brushed tentatively against Neal’s. Back and forth. Desire pooled in his stomach, and all it was all he could do to hold back.

“I wish you would already,” said Neal.
In the next instant, Peter closed the remaining distance and gave them what they had both been waiting for.

* WC – WC – WC – WC – WC – WC – WC *

*Friday, July 2, 10:32PM*

Thank fuck, Neal thought, as Peter finally kissed him.

The surge of need that coursed through his veins was overwhelming. It licked like a flame across his skin, skittered down his spine, tugged at his core. He pressed forward, smashing his mouth into Peter’s, rolling his hips and scrambling for purchase on Peter’s arms, his chest, his hair…wherever he could grab onto.

Funny that ten minutes ago, he had been a bundle of nervous energy, wound up and not sure what direction to point himself in.

He had been leaning against the windowsill, desperately wishing Peter would just come to him, invade his space and take over, like he had in the kitchen earlier. Neal had made the first move, on the sofa. He wanted Peter to make this one.

And Peter was holding back. It made Neal nervous, like maybe Peter didn’t want this after all, and it was just another thing he was doing to help out Neal, to make him feel better. The thought made him sick to his stomach, even as he knew – he knew – it wasn’t true.

Still, there was this wall between them suddenly, and he didn’t know how to break it down or climb over it.

When Peter had asked him to speak up about anything that made him uncomfortable, Neal had swallowed back his nerves and mentioned the hood. Since seeing it with Mozzie earlier that evening, the image of it had sat in the back of Neal’s mind, taunting him.

He couldn’t let Peter use it, no matter how much Peter might want to. He just couldn’t. It would remind him too much of…

Neal was glad he had spoken up, was glad Peter had agreed, was glad the restraints were safely tucked away in another room and not a part of what was going on in his bed that night.

Still, there had been a moment when it had made him feel weak, to ask. It had made him feel weak to need Peter to remove everything from the room.

Neal wasn’t weak. He had never been weak, and he refused to be weak now. Once upon a lifetime ago, he had enjoyed some kink mixed in with his sex. It had never been anything consistent, or serious, but he had played with a number of partners. He had liked it.

It was just that, after Friedrich…it was confusing.

Neal didn’t like feeling weak, which is why he had nearly dared Peter to restrain him.

He was grateful Peter had refused. Maybe someday, but not…not now.

Now, what Peter was doing with his mouth was enough to make him tremble harder than he ever had when in submission to a partner. The way Peter alternated between crushing, demanding pressure and light teasing was going to kill Neal. Just when he thought he had a rhythm going, Peter would change it, throwing Neal’s nerve endings into confusion.
He groaned as Peter pulled back again, licking lightly at the insides of his lips and kissing the corner of his mouth.

“Peter,” he gasped, fingers digging into Peter’s chest. “Jesus, please. Just…”

He could feel Peter’s lips turn up in a smile, but he continued to nibble. When Neal surged forward, Peter pulled back, and Neal moaned.

With a frustrated grunt, he shoved at Peter’s shoulder, pushing the man onto his back. Neal crawled on top of him, straddling his hips, and took control.

This was going to be fast, and hard. He couldn’t handle anything else at the moment.

Peter let Neal take over, turning pliant and soft underneath him, and that nearly broke Neal in two. He slid his tongue around the edge of Peter’s – very smooth – jaw and down the cords of his neck, to the hollow at its base. He swirled his tongue there a moment, listening to Peter gasp.

Then he sucked – hard – and Peter thrust his hips upwards.

Their hard lengths came into harsh contact and they both cried out.

“Neal,” panted Peter. He thrust his hips up again, and Neal met his rhythm, continuing to lick and suck at Peter’s neck. Their cocks dragged together, the thin fabric of their pajama bottoms the only barrier, and Neal felt his orgasm beginning to build.

He squeezed his eyes shut.

*Please,* he thought. *Please, please, please…* It had been so long since this was on his terms, and his alone, and maybe, *finally…*

“Neal, wait. Wait, stop,” Peter muttered urgently.

Neal ignored Peter’s direction and continued to rut, rocking his hips back and forth, his face buried in Peter’s neck, ugly grunts the only noise he was able to make.

“Neal. *Neal,* fuck.”

Neal felt Peter’s hands grab at his hips and fasten there in a bruising grip. Peter held Neal away from him, chanting for him to stop, and wait. Neal strained against Peter’s grasp – damn it, why was Peter so strong – seeking the continued friction and the release at the end of it, but he couldn’t get there.

He let out a whine.

“Neal, god. You have to…you have to calm down a second, okay? Just for a second. Can you open your eyes?”

Neal squeezed his eyes shut tighter and pushed against Peter’s hands.

“*Neal. Look at me.*”

Neal’s eyes flew open, and there was Peter. Looking up at him, eyes shining in the moonlight. He slowed, and then stilled.

“Good,” said Peter. “That’s good. Okay.”
Peter rolled them to the side, so they were lying facing each other once again.

*Oh god,* Neal thought, coming back to reality. He had just been wildly bucking against Peter, with absolutely no finesse or concern for what Peter wanted. Like an animal. Like he had no use but for —

“Stop,” said Peter. “Whatever is going through your head, stop. Can you breath for me? Come on, take a deep breath.”

Neal tried, and found that his lungs felt too tight. He wheezed instead.

Peter saw, and slid a hand around to Neal’s chest. He rubbed slow circles, whispering for Neal to relax and breath. Eventually, Neal found that he could. He listened to Peter’s voice, followed his instructions, and started to feel more like himself again.

“Okay?” asked Peter.

Neal nodded. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I don’t know—“

“Shhh,” said Peter. “Don’t apologize. You didn’t do anything wrong. I just felt like we were a train barreling down a tunnel and I wanted to stop and enjoy it a little before we got to the destination.”

He leaned forward and placed a soft kiss on Neal’s lips. Neal sighed, and felt the tension ebbing out of him.

“Can you let me take care of you for a while?” asked Peter.

Neal nodded.

This time, it was Peter who gently nudged Neal onto his back and swung a leg over to straddle him. Instead of reclaiming Neal’s mouth, however, Peter sat up and began to run his hands up and down Neal’s chest and stomach, slowly, then faster, then slowly again. Neal shivered.

“Can I take your shirt off?” asked Peter.

“Only if you take yours off too,” said Neal. He felt a spike of desire as Peter grinned down at him and hauled his shirt over his head, revealing a muscled chest, shoulders, and stomach.

Neal reached up, hands hovering an inch above Peter’s skin. He raised his eyes to meet Peter’s, and Peter nodded his permission. Neal placed his palms flat against Peter’s smooth skin and moaned softly. He traced the lines of Peter’s muscles, feeling them clench and release beneath his fingers.

“Your turn,” whispered Peter. He grabbed the hem of Neal’s shirt and dragged it up. Neal sat up slightly to help the process, and in a quick motion, Peter was flinging the shirt across the room.

When Peter’s hands came into contact with Neal’s sensitive skin, Neal gasped.

“God,” said Peter. “You’re so….”

Neal felt Peter’s fingers bump along his exposed ribs, sliding along in the spaces between, where there should be more muscle. He shivered, and was glad for the darkness. Peter couldn’t see his face go red.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “It’ll get better. I’ll eat more. Maybe some protein shakes—“
“Cut it out,” said Peter. “You’re beautiful.”

Now Neal’s blush was for a different reason. He had been told he was attractive before. Many times. But this hit him differently. The way Peter said it, the way he was barely brushing his fingertips up Neal’s torso…he felt the genuineness of it, the true appreciation.

But he forgot all about it when Peter shifted, lowering his mouth to Neal’s chest and fastening on a nipple.

Neal gasped and arched his back. Peter smiled against his skin, sucking lightly until his nipple was standing at attention. Then Peter skimmed his tongue in a circle around the sharp peak, and Neal grabbed onto the sheets for dear life.

When Peter used his teeth, giving a light tug that Neal felt all the way down in his stomach, Neal’s hands let go of the bedding and flew up to grip Peter’s hair. He wasn’t entirely sure whether he was trying to hold Peter there or pull him away. Maybe both.

Peter transferred his attentions to Neal’s other nipple, and it started all over. Arch, suck, tongue, teeth. Then back to the first. This went on forever, until Neal felt like he was in a loop of sensation. He could feel his brain starting to fog up.

Just when he thought he couldn’t stand it any longer, Peter surged up and captured his mouth again, kissing him deeply.

“How you doing?” asked Peter. “Still okay?”

Neal hummed. He didn’t think he could form words in this hazy, floating place he seemed to be. He wasn’t sure if he had effectively communicated exactly how okay he was, so with extreme effort, he managed to sling an arm around Peter’s neck and pull him back in for another kiss.

“Good,” said Peter, chuckling softly. “Keep going?”

“Please,” Neal managed.

Peter nibbled his way to Neal’s ear, then down his neck, spending some time getting acquainted with his collarbone. All of the urgency had fled by this point. Neal simply reveled in the sensation of Peter Burke with his mouth and hands all over his body. He had a vague thought he’d like to return the favor.

This. This is what he had been waiting for. This is what he had truly wanted. Not the frantic pace of earlier, but this slow, careful dance that held with it the promise of lots of time.

But they might not have time, said a small, persistent voice in the back of Neal’s mind. Next week, they might lose the arbitration. In the meantime, Friedrich might try to have him killed again. They might only have this.

And then, what would happen to them? If they moved forward now, let themselves have this, and Neal was ripped from it, it might just kill him before anyone else had the chance to.

Peter must have felt Neal tense up, because he pulled back. “What’s going on in your head?” he asked.

“Nothing,” said Neal. “Just keep…touching me.” If it ended up killing him, Neal decided, it would have been worth it.
“I can do that,” said Peter. But he was still looking down at Neal, lines of slight concern marring his face.

“Then what are you waiting for?” asked Neal. He fumbled for Peter’s hands, guiding them onto his chest, sliding them lower until they rested just below his navel. He clenched his stomach muscles and moaned slightly at the heat of Peter’s palms.

Peter got the message. He shifted lower on the bed, sliding his fingers underneath the waistband of Neal’s pants. He paused.

Neal lifted his hips in permission, and Peter slowly slid his pants and boxer briefs down, keeping up a steady, fluid motion until they were all the way off. He held them out over the side of the bed and let them fall to the fall with a soft whumpf.

Neal had thought he might be nervous again, being naked in front of Peter. It wasn’t the first time, but this time was very different from the last. To his surprise, there were no nerves. Instead, his breath caught at the look in Peter’s eyes as they raked over his frame.

Peter didn’t immediately crawl back up the bed, like Neal expected him to. Instead, he perched down by Neal’s feet for a moment, just looking. Neal shivered.

Finally, Peter picked up Neal’s left foot, cradling it in his warm palms, massaging gently with this thumbs. Neal moaned softly. Peter lifted the foot to his mouth and placed a kiss on Neal’s instep.

“I’ve been watching your feet,” Peter whispered. “I hadn’t realized it, but I have been. I keep thinking about you walking around here barefoot, and what that means. Maybe it means nothing. Maybe it means you trust our housekeeping. Maybe you don’t like shoes.”

Neal stared at Peter, feeling the pull in his hamstring as Peter raised his foot up again for another kiss.

“You’re so light on them, so graceful,” said Peter. “The way you move fascinates me. And it starts here.”

Neal gaped at Peter, having trouble believing that these words were coming out of the mouth of his gruff FBI agent. Then again, hadn’t the last week taught Neal that he might not know Peter as well as he thought? Peter’s softer side had already surprised Neal more than once, and awakened in him this dormant need.

Peter kissed his ankle then, just below the monitor. He slid his tongue underneath the strap and back out again. He moved upward, leisurely running his lips along Neal’s calf, the back of his knee. When he reached the soft, newly-healed skin just above the knee, he lingered there, gently moving his lips in small circles, making a humming sound, which sent vibrations straight into Neal’s muscles. Neal sighed at the sensation, and Peter was on the move again, sliding up to his inner thigh…

Neal felt himself tense, the need beginning to build again the closer Peter got to his core.

But when Peter arrived within a breath of his steadily weeping cock, he pulled back. Neal whimpered.

“Shhhh,” said Peter. “I’ve got the other side to get to know first.”

By the time Peter reached the promised land again, Neal was panting, clenching his fists together. He was in range of his release, and he knew that it wasn’t far off, whether Peter touched him or
“Neal?” Peter’s voice was a low rumble against his inner thigh.

“Mmm?” was all Neal could manage.

“Just making sure you’re still with me,” said Peter.

“Don’t stop,” said Neal. “Please, Peter.”

“Got it,” said Peter.

Without warning, Peter ran the flat of his tongue up the underside of Neal’s cock.

“Ahhh, god.” Neal gasped, his hips thrusting up of their own accord. “Warn a guy.”

“No,” said Peter, and then his mouth covered Neal’s cock in one smooth, wet motion.

The sounds that erupted out of Neal at that point were barely human. He didn’t even realize it was him for a moment, and then he just gave in. It wasn’t like he could hold back, not with Peter moving up and down, pausing a moment to suck on the head and then plunging forward so that Neal could feel himself bumping against the back of Peter’s throat.

He felt his stomach tighten, that electric, rushing sensation that came right before orgasm. He scrambled at the sheets, unable to control the thrusting motions of his hips, biting down on his lip and letting out breathy moans that cut off every time Peter change the angle of his mouth or the speed of his motions.

Almost, thought Neal. Please, please, please...

But this was different than the last almost. He felt more like himself, in the moment, not lost in the fever but present and focused on the heat of Peter’s mouth, the delicious vibrations as he moaned along with Neal.

He was ready for this. This was good. This was right. With Peter.

Peter pulled off and sucked in a deep breath, closing his hand around Neal to take the place of his mouth, stroking steadily.

“There you go,” said Peter. “You’re so close, I can feel it. Come on now. Come for me, Neal.”

Neal nearly did at just those words, and then Peter’s mouth was on him again. Yes yes yes — But when he felt a light touch over his hole, he froze.

“Wait,” he breathed, between moans. “Waitwaitwait.”

Peter was gone so suddenly, Neal had to shake his head and blink a few times to make sure he was still even there on the bed. At Neal’s wait, he had pulled his mouth off and his hands away and lurched to the side, so that he wasn’t touching Neal at all.

“Sorry,” said Peter. “I’m so sorry.”

“No,” said Neal.

“Okay,” said Peter. “We didn’t talk about – god you tasted so good, I think I lost my mind a
second. Got carried away. But we can stop.”

“What?” said Neal. He was still so close, god. He reached down and grabbed his dick, squeezing the base tight to stave off the orgasm. He almost couldn’t believe he was doing it, when just a few seconds ago he had—

Right. He had stopped Peter. And now Peter was looking down at him, an unbearably sad and regretful look on his face. Because he thought Neal… wanted him to stop.

Oh.

Neal couldn’t help the grin that spread across his face. Peter had really meant it when he had said that all Neal had to say was no. But that look on Peter’s face really had to go.

“Hey,” said Neal. His voice was raw – no wonder, he had been moaning at top volume for who knows how long – but he could speak again. “Peter.”

He reached out a hand, and Peter moved close enough for Neal to grab his wrist. He tugged, and Peter easily came down to settle on the bed beside him.

“I’m sorry,” said Peter, again.

“Don’t,” said Neal. “That’s not what I meant. I didn’t mean stop, I just meant…I was close.”

Peter smiled faintly. “I know,” he said. “I was there.”

Neal let out a weak laugh. “I didn’t want to…the first time, I didn’t want to come that way.”

“That way? In my mouth? Neal, I’m fine with it. I wanted—”

“It’s not that – fuck, now it’s all I can think about, give me a minute.” He let out a slow breath, and continued to grip himself tightly, not daring to let go just yet, especially since the images flooding his mind consisted of the way Peter’s face would look as he swallowed Neal down.

Unable to resist, he rolled to his side and grabbed Peter’s chin, pulling him in for a kiss. “I want to come on your cock,” he whispered against Peter’s mouth.

Peter grunted. “Shit, Neal.” Neal felt him move and knew he was probably holding onto his dick too. They were certainly a pair.

“Well you don’t want to,” said Neal.

“I do,” said Peter. “There’s nothing else I’d…are you sure? We didn’t talk about going that far.”

“We’re talking about it now, aren’t we?” asked Neal. “Besides, no time like the present. Might be all we have.”

Peter nosed against Neal’s cheek. “Don’t think like that,” he said. “I’d rather think positive. Like that this would be the first of many, many nights.”

Neal’s chest squeezed tight. He wanted that too. So much. Then something crossed his mind.

“Hang on,” said Neal. “Please tell me you have—“

“Boy scout, remember?” said Peter. He rolled away from Neal to the other side of the bed. A drawer opened and closed, and Peter was back, kissing his neck. “Always… be…prepared…” he
muttered, licking his way around Neal’s ear.

“Jesus,” said Neal. “You’d better hurry up or I might not make it.”

“Yes, sir,” said Peter. He kissed Neal’s cheek and then shifted again, crawled down the bed. Neal made a move to roll over, but Peter stopped him with a hand on his ankle. “No,” he said. “I’d rather this way.”

Neal nodded and settled down. He tried to relax.

He wanted this. He didn’t want anything more at the moment, than to feel Peter stretching him out, filling him up. He needed that.

And yet, voices in the dark corners of his mind couldn’t help but remind him that the last time someone had been near him like that, it hadn’t been fun. He pushed the thoughts aside as best he could, focusing on Peter and what he was doing at the foot of the bed.

He had shucked his own pants, and was now nestled on his knees in between Neal’s spread legs. Neal heard the telltale pop of a cap coming off a tube, and then Peter was back, kissing his way up Neal’s chest to his neck.

Neal groaned as his dick brushed against Peter’s stomach. “Please,” he muttered. “Don’t drag it out, just—”

He stopped talking and inhaled sharply at the press of Peter’s finger against his hole.

“Ready?” asked Peter in his ear.

“Mmmhmm.” He pressed his lips together, readying himself for the shock.

It didn’t come. Instead, Peter continued to circle his hole, drawing more moans from deep in his chest. His mouth fell open and he found himself pressing his hips down, seeking the pressure.

Then Peter was in, and he lost all sense of linear time. The initial stretch was good, and sent chills down his spine, and seemed to go on too long. There was a burn – two fingers, now – that had him tensing up, but as soon as Peter started hitting his sweet spot, he cried out.

God, it had been so long since this felt so good. Neal reveled in it, in the way Peter’s fingers brushed inside him just right. He felt his abdomen tightening again, and he knew he was close. He needed Peter now, or else he was going to—

Peter pulled his fingers out, and Neal whined. “Don’t stop, please,” he begged. Peter chuckled.

“I have to,” he said, “if you want me to get the show on the road, which you keep muttering at me.”

Was he talking out loud? He hadn’t realized. He wondered exactly what he had been saying, but when he heard the crinkle of the condom wrapper, he decided he didn’t care.

He reached up blindly, and Peter responded, falling toward him and covering him, supporting his weight with one arm. Peter kissed him deeply, and then pulled back.

“Ready?” he asked.

Neal could feel Peter’s dick pressed up against him. “Yeah,” he breathed. “Come on, I want you in—”
And then he was. Neal sucked in a breath at the intrusion, and Peter paused, halfway inside.

“Okay?” he asked, kissing along the underside of Neal’s jaw.

Neal grunted, but he spread his legs wider, slid his hands around Peter’s back, and pulled him closer. Peter slid in another inch.

“Hang on,” said Peter. “I want to make sure you’re okay.”

“I’m okay,” said Neal through gritted teeth. His erection had flagged, and it hurt, but he knew what was on the other side, and he needed to get there. He pulled at Peter’s back again, and Peter slid in further, letting out a grunt of his own.

“Jesus, Neal,” he whispered. “God, you feel so good. I can’t…can I…”

“Yes,” said Neal. “Please.” He pulled again, and Peter was now fully seated inside him. They both moaned in unison.

Yes, thought Neal. Perfect. All doubts fled at the feeling of Peter stretching him out. It felt good, and right, and pure, like it was his first time and he wasn’t damaged goods.

He wiggled his hips, and Peter whimpered. “I can move?” he asked.

Instead of answering, Neal canted his hips back and then forward. Peter took the response as a yes and pulled almost all the way out before sliding back in, bumping up against Neal’s prostate in a way that made him shake from the inside.

“Peter.” He buried his head in Peter’s neck. “Keep going. You’re so – ahhh.”

Peter began to thrust in and out with a steady, unhurried rhythm. All the while, he was mumbling in Neal’s ear. “That’s good, you’re perfect, fuck, so gorgeous, fuck,” in a never-ending, erratic loop.

Neal shuddered with each thrust, feeling like there wasn’t room for anything other than Peter, not inside him, not in his head, not in his heart, not with Peter taking up all that space for himself.

“Neal.” Peter’s whispers were urgent now. “Hold on.”

Suddenly, Peter’s hand was gripping his cock, pulling in long, steady strokes in time with the rhythm of his hips.

“Oh, god.” Neal threw his head back, dug his nails into Peter’s flesh. He had to hold on, all right.

His moans increased in intensity. Almost, almost…

“Come now, Neal,” said Peter. “For me.”

That was all it took, and Neal was coming harder than he could ever remember coming before. It went on and on, wave after wave, until he was sure that his entire body – and Peter’s, and the bed, and possibly the wall – was coated.

As Neal clenched around Peter’s cock, Peter groaned his own release, grabbing a fistful of Neal’s hair and tugging painfully as he went rigid.

The last thing Neal remembered was Peter kissing him. Then everything went black.

* WC – WC – WC – WC – WC – WC – WC *
Friday, July 2, 11:41PM

Peter felt Neal go slack beneath him, and pulled back from the kiss.

“Neal?” he murmured.

Neal didn’t respond. He was limp in Peter’s arms, his lips parted, eyes closed, breathing deeply. Peter brushed the hair off of his forehead, and tried again.

“Neal? You with me?”

Still no response. Peter watched the younger man with concern for a moment. He placed two fingers on Neal’s neck, feeling a steady pulse.

*I’ll be damned,* thought Peter. *He passed out.*

Peter couldn’t help but grin at the thought. What they had just done? To him, it had been mind-blowing. It seemed that Neal had felt the same way. At least, it had been good enough to knock him out.

Slowly, Peter eased himself out of Neal. He levered himself off the bed, groaning at the way his muscles complained at him. He disposed of the condom and placed the lube back in the nightstand.

He checked on Neal again. Still out like a light.

Peter headed for the bathroom. He cleaned himself up, then brought a washcloth back into the bedroom for Neal. Neal continued to snore lightly as Peter washed him, though he gave a slight shiver as the cool air hit his now-damp skin. Peter pulled the covers up over Neal, then tossed washcloth in the hamper.

He was thirsty, and he was sure Neal would be, too, when he woke up, so he headed down to the kitchen to get them some water. He filled up one glass for himself, downed it in one go, and then filled it up again.

As he filled a glass for Neal, he shook his head in disbelief. Barely twenty-four hours earlier, what had just happened was the furthest thing from his mind. It seemed like things had moved awfully fast, from him realizing that morning that he had these feelings for Neal to acting upon them.

Okay, maybe all that wasn’t precisely true. He was coming to terms with the fact that he had had these feelings for Neal for a much longer time. He just hadn’t admitted it to himself, or recognized it, until now. He had chalked it up to just enjoying Neal, and wanting to take care of him. He knew better now.

And *now* he, Peter Burke, had just slept with Neal Caffrey. He had fucked Neal Caffrey. He had listened to Neal Caffrey fall to pieces beneath him. He had whispered in his ear and been tucked inside him and *goddamnit* if it hadn’t been one of the best things he had ever done in his life.

Part of him worried about that. He really couldn’t compare his experience with Neal to what he felt for Elizabeth. There was no way to make the comparison. Elizabeth was his wife and best friend, whom he loved. He had chosen to make his life with her. He thought she was the sexiest, most beautiful woman on earth.

And yet…being with Neal pulled at something inside him that was *different*. Not better, not more, not harder, just…*different*. It was something he hadn’t known he was missing, and now that he had
it, he wasn’t sure he’d be able to give it up.

If Neal told him to stop, he’d stop, of course. It just might kill him to do it.

When Peter reached the bedroom, he paused in the doorway. He saw Neal’s form, tucked under the covers, and listened. Neal appeared to have rolled onto his side, facing the window. But was that…

Yes. Neal was crying.

"Neal?" asked Peter. He took a step into the room, his stomach plummeting. What had happened? "Are you all right?"

There was a pause, and then a muffled, "I’m fine."

*Right. Not fine, then.*

Peter set the water glasses on the nightstand and moved quickly around to the other side of the bed to crouch down and see what was going on.

“Neal?” he said cautiously. He knelt on the floor beside the bed and reached out, brushing Neal’s hair out of his eyes, which were red-rimmed and watery. “Hey,” he said, alarm evident in his voice. “What’s going on?”

Neal didn’t answer. He turned his head and buried it in his pillow. His shoulders continued to shake with silent sobs.

*Fuck.* Peter’s heart started beating rapidly, and he felt a cold sweat break out on his neck. He knew this was a mistake. He knew Neal wasn’t really able to tell what he wanted. Now Neal regretted it, and Peter had fucked it all up.

“Neal,” he said, his voice miserable, “I’m sorry. I’m so fucking sorry. I shouldn’t have…tell me what to do. What you need. Just tell me, and I’ll do it.”

He waited, his hands on the edge of the bed, afraid to touch Neal again. Neal didn’t respond.

“I just…I want you to know that nothing has changed. I’m still going to fight to keep you here, and you can still work cases with me. Just like I promised, okay?”

Still no response. Peter sat back on his heels and rubbed his palms over his face.

“Okay,” he said. “I’ll just…I brought you some water. I can go. If you need anything, just call me.”

“Don’t.” Neal twisted and his hand shot out, grabbing Peter’s arm.

“Don’t…don’t what?” asked Peter. “I’m not going to touch you, I promise.”

Neal blinked up at him, his eyes shining pools in the moonlight. “Don’t go,” he said. Then he crumpled, snatching his hand back. “Wait…you don’t want to touch me anymore?”

Peter frowned. “Of course I want – You don’t want me to go? Neal, what’s the matter? Please, just tell me what I did, I’m no good at this. I want to fix it but I don’t have any idea what to fix. What’s going on?”

“I don’t know.” Neal’s voice was barely a whisper. He squeezed his eyes shut, as if the air burned them. “I don’t know why I’m…why this is happening. But I don’t want you to go. Please.”
“Okay,” said Peter. “I’m not going anywhere, not if you don’t want me to. Can I…should I just sit here?”

There was a long silence. Peter cautiously reached out and placed a hand on Neal’s shoulder. When Neal didn’t jerk away, he slowly stroked down Neal’s arm and back up.

Neal sighed, and visibly relaxed, so Peter continued.

Finally, Neal opened his eyes. “Could you get back in bed?” he asked.

“Thought you’d never ask,” said Peter. He quickly moved around to crawl onto his side of the bed. He shifted closer to Neal, pulling the covers up and around them.

He hesitated when he was a few inches away, not sure of how much contact might be too much. He still wasn’t sure what had happened.

Neal scooted backwards until he was tucked against Peter, and Peter smiled with relief. He wrapped an arm around Neal and pulled him close, tucking his nose into Neal’s neck.

“Mmmm. Better,” said Neal.

“Good,” said Peter. He ran his hand up Neal’s chest, stroking in slow circles in the way that seemed best to calm him down. He felt Neal melting back into him and relaxed himself. He continued his motions for a while. He was pretty sure Neal was still awake, so he spoke.

“I was so worried,” murmured Peter. “I thought you…that maybe you were having regrets. About what we did.”

“No regrets,” said Neal. He hummed again. “That was fucking amazing. You didn’t think so?”

“Oh, I thought so,” said Peter. “I thought so. And I originally thought you did to. I managed to knock you out with the power of my penis.”

Neal laughed. “You’re such a dork,” he said. “So…that’s what happened? I passed out?”

“It would seem,” said Peter. “I was kissing you, and you were just…out. So I got us cleaned up, and then I went for water. Speaking of which…”

He untangled himself from Neal, and sat up, reaching for Neal’s water glass.

“Wait,” said Neal. “Don’t—“

“I’m right here,” said Peter. “You should drink some water.”

“Oh.” Neal pushed himself up, looking embarrassed. He took the glass from Peter and drank thirstily. “Thanks. I guess I really needed that.”

They settled back down, this time with Neal facing Peter, their arms around each other.

Peter was silent for a few minutes, and then cleared his throat. “You seem to be worried that I might not…that I don’t want to be here. With you.”

Neal licked his lips. “I don’t think it’s that, exactly. Not consciously, anyway.”

“Because I do, you know,” said Peter.
“I know.” Neal flopped onto his back, staring at the ceiling. “I think it was just…I woke up, and you weren’t here. I didn’t know where you had gone, and I just had this overwhelming sense of…I guess maybe sadness? I don’t know what it was. It felt like I had lost something, and I was never going to get it back, and it made me feel sort of hopeless and anxious at the same time. It wasn’t…it didn’t make logical sense, and I knew it didn’t make logical sense, but that didn’t stop me from feeling it. Like, I told myself you went to the bathroom, and I knew that was probably true, but my heart didn’t believe it and I was afraid you had decided this wasn’t any good for you and left. I felt like I had pushed myself on you, and you hadn’t really wanted this, and I had screwed everything up.” He ran a hand through his hair, and laughed sadly. “Way to go, Neal. Way to make no sense whatsoever.”

“Stop,” said Peter. As Neal was talking, he had realized something, and was kicking himself for not seeing it sooner. “I think I get it. Maybe you were…” He paused, trying to figure out how to bring up the subject gently. “You said before that you had used restraints in the past, right?”

“Right,” said Neal. He glanced at Peter warily.

“So…have you ever felt anything like this before? After doing that?”

Neal frowned. “I don’t think so,” he said.

“It can happen sometimes, and it’s called sub-drop. I didn’t even think about it, since we weren’t doing anything like that. But what you described sounds a lot like it.” Peter swallowed. “I think that maybe because of the nature of our situation, even though we weren’t actually doing anything that would usually be associated with submission…”

“My brain made the connection anyway?”

“Something like that.” Peter watched Neal carefully. Neal was clearly thinking hard, a little wrinkle of concentration between his eyes and a slight frown on his face. Finally, he just shook his head.

“So because of what happened with – you’re saying I can’t even have regular old sex now without my brain tricking itself into thinking I’m being dominated? Jesus, I’m even more fucked up than you know,” said Neal miserably. “You should probably just wash your hands of me and get on with your life.”

Peter sighed, then reached out and pulled Neal against him. “Can’t,” he said. “Now that I’ve got a taste of Neal Caffrey, you’re stuck with me. Neal, if I had known, I wouldn’t have left, not for a second, until you woke up and I knew you were okay.”

“I know.” Neal snuggled into Peter’s chest.

“Good.” They lay there a while, feeling each other breath in and out.

Just as drowsiness started to take over, and Peter felt his eyelids droop, Neal spoke again, his voice full of wonder.

“I sort of can’t believe we just did that.”

Peter snorted. “Me neither. And yet…” He stroked a hand down Neal’s spine and back up again. It was becoming one of his favorite motions, and it brought comfort to him as well as to Neal. “…if I wasn’t so tired I’d be suggesting we do it again right away.”

“Can you go again so soon?” asked Neal. “I mean, you are a lot older—“
“Careful,” said Peter. “And I’m not that much older. Smartass.”

There was another moment of silence. Peter thought about the evening. How he had been so anxious, how they had reminisced about all that time playing cat and mouse, how Neal had revealed part of why he would sneak into Peter’s rooms to leave gifts and messages…

“Hey, Neal? Are you still awake?” he asked.

“Sort of,” Neal mumbled against his chest.

“What did that note say?”

“What note?”

Peter huffed. “The one you left with that magnet, in Florence. I can’t remember which one that was, and it’s bugging me.”

Neal was quiet for a moment, and Peter was disappointed, thinking maybe Neal had forgotten, too. But then—

“Le cose belle arrivano quando non le cerchi,” whispered Neal.

_right. That one._

“Beautiful things come when you’re not looking,” translated Peter.

_they certainly do_, he thought. He pulled Neal even closer, and let himself drift into a deep, dreamless sleep.

**Chapter End Notes**

Like I said, don't go anywhere. Enemies are all around, and the battle isn't won.
Chapter 36: Aftermath

Saturday, July 3, 6:02AM

Neal woke up just after sunrise the next morning with the overwhelming urge to pee. He tried to move, and found that he was completely tangled up with Peter: arms wrapped around and under each other, legs intertwined.

That wasn’t all that different from how he had been waking up for the past week, except for one key difference.

They were both completely naked.

As Neal felt the skin of the most intimate parts of his body slide against Peter’s it hit him: he slept with Peter Burke last night.

Thinking about it made the urge to pee worse, so he pushed at Peter’s heavy limbs to get free. Peter’s response was to grunt and pull him closer, which also caused some…rubbing…in places that were currently dangerous.

“Peter,” he gasped, pushing again. “You have to let me up. Please.”

Peter opened an eye. “What’s the matter?” he asked, his voice rough.

“I have to pee. I’ll be right back and you can cling all you want. Just please—“
Peter squeezed him tight and then suddenly opened his arms, letting go. Neal fell backwards, rolling off the bed and landing on the floor with an explosion of breath. He scrambled to his feet, ignoring Peter’s muffled “you okay?” and sprinted for the bathroom.

A few minutes later, he leaned his forehead against the wall in the bathroom, sighing with relief. And he had a moment to let himself think.

He almost couldn’t believe what had happened. He had had sex with Peter Burke. Peter Burke, who had intrigued and – let’s face it – intimidated him a little for years, had taken him to bed. He had put his hands and mouth in places that made Neal blush to remember. In his hands, Neal had finally been able to orgasm on his own terms, for the first time since Friedrich. And he had every intention of doing it again.

But there was more to it than that.

Something had been…happening between them since Peter showed up at the Justice Facility that day, like Neal’s own personal angel of grace. Whether it was because he was forced into a truly vulnerable position with Peter that day, or because of something else, it felt like most of the walls that had been up between them had come crashing to the ground. They were no longer FBI Agent and Con, but just two individuals who…cared about each other.

That was it, wasn’t it? He cared about Peter, and Peter clearly cared about him. Why, he wasn’t sure. As far as Neal was concerned, he had done nothing but cause trouble for Peter and screw up his comfortable little life. But Peter wasn’t giving up on him, and that was enough to make Neal’s knees shake a little with wonder.

It also worried him. He was feeling things, strong things, about Peter. He wasn’t prepared to think about the depth of that just yet, but he did know that there were minefields here. Peter was worried that Neal’s feelings had more to do with their circumstances than their actual selves, worried that Neal was acting the way he was out of gratitude or relief rather than real desire.

Neal was pretty sure that wasn’t the case, but if he had learned anything from the night before and his reaction to their intimacy, it was that nothing about this was simple. He had issues, a lot of them, and it was going to take time to sort it through. He was sure about one thing, however: no matter what issues he had, he had definitely enjoyed being with Peter.

He closed his eyes and brought a hand to his face, running his fingertips over his cheekbones and lips. He imagined that the ghost-like touch was Peter, the way Peter had skimmed his hands over Neal’s body last night.

Neal shivered.

Yes, there was definitely a lot going on here, and he needed to sort it all out. But in the meantime, he was going to focus on what was making him happy.

He left the bathroom and returned to the bedroom to find Peter snoring softly, sprawled across the bed. Neal considered his options, since Peter wasn’t leaving him much room. Eventually, he lifted the covers and slid in to what was normally Peter’s side, curling up behind him.

When Neal snuck an arm around Peter’s waist and tucked his knees up behind Peter’s, the man’s breath stuttered a bit. Neal waited to see if Peter would wake, but he didn’t, and his breathing evened out again.

Neal took advantage of this rare opportunity. Usually, Peter was the one curling around him in this
way, and there was something a little heady about getting a chance to be the big spoon for once. He crowded closer, burying his nose in Peter’s neck.

No wonder he likes doing this, thought Neal, breathing in Peter’s scent. He felt calm, and in control, and like…like he had some responsibility that made his heart warm.

Slowly, he moved his hand up Peter’s chest, stroking softly. He placed soft kisses to the back of Peter’s neck. When his fingers found one of Peter’s nipples, he lingered there, teasing and brushing until Peter let out a shaky breath.

“Morning,” Peter mumbled. He moved as if to turn towards Neal, but Neal held him in place.

“Wait,” said Neal. Peter stilled, and Neal hummed in satisfaction at his response. He began to explore Peter’s chest and stomach with boldness, reveling in the tiny gasps Peter made every time his hand brushed against Peter’s erection.

After a few minutes, he rolled Peter onto his back and sat up, continuing to trace undefined shapes on his chest. Peter looked up at him, his eyes dark and full of wonder. Peter smiled.

“Finding anything you like?” he asked.

“Maybe,” said Neal. “I need to look around a little more, though.”

He swung a leg over Peter’s hips, feeling his breath catch as Peter moved into him, bringing them into full contact. But that wasn’t what Neal wanted. Not yet, no matter how much his dick screamed for it.

Neal wagged a finger and smirked down at Peter. “Now, now,” he said. “Don’t be in such a rush, remember?”

“No rush,” said Peter. “Just…” Instead of finishing the sentence, he reached out for Neal and hauled him forward to attack his mouth. Neal groaned, trying not to lose control.

He grabbed at Peter’s wrists and pinned them to the mattress on either side of Peter’s head. Peter’s eyes widened slightly.

“You got a chance to get to know me last night,” said Neal. “It’s only fair, don’t you think, that I get a turn today?”

Peter licked his lips and blew out a breath, then grinned. “Only fair,” he said.

“Don’t touch,” said Neal. “Just let me…” He trailed off and leaned in to taste the skin under Peter’s jaw, unable to resist any longer. His tongue trailed along the edges of Peter’s muscles and tendons, licking along the hard planes and soft spaces on his chest.

Remembering what Peter had done to him the night before, Neal spent a while getting to know Peter’s nipples. At one point, one of Peter’s hands cupped the back of Neal’s head.

“Hey,” said Neal. “I said—“

“Sorry,” breathed Peter. “Jesus, Neal.” He removed his hand and placed it back beside his head, balling it into a fist. “You’re killing me here.”

“Good,” said Neal. He thrilled in the knowledge that what he was doing was driving Peter crazy, wringing delicious, erratic sounds out of him. And the fact that Peter was trying to remain
compliant beneath him, just because he asked?

That was the fucking cherry on top.

As Neal moved lower, Peter tensed beneath him, clearly trying to maintain control. Neal had intended to make him wait, to take his time and drive him even crazier, like Peter had done to Neal the night before, but as soon as he got within licking distance of Peter’s weeping cock, he knew he didn’t have the self-control.

_Screw it_, he thought, and swallowed Peter whole.

Peter bucked up off the mattress, thrusting his cock deep into Neal’s throat, and Neal gagged.

“Sorry, sorry,” said Peter, starting to sit up and reach for Neal. “Shit, I’m sorry—“

Neal coughed once, and shoved Peter back down. “Stay,” he said, and smirked. “Don’t be sorry, that was…”

_That was hot_. Neal knew he had felt it, the tightening in his own stomach, the surge of lust, at Peter shoving into him like that. He wanted more.

Without waiting, he went back to work, this time with a firmer grip on Peter’s hips so he would be more prepared next time. He shouldn’t have worried. Peter grabbed at the sheets, straining to stay still.

_And that was even hotter._

Neal couldn’t say how long he spent getting acquainted with Peter in this way. He knew that he spent a while mapping out the delicate skin that seemed like it was barely containing the life within, the placement of the veins, the shape of the head. He knew that he figured out exactly how far he could take Peter before his gag reflex kicked in, and how much of his hand he needed to use to make up the difference.

He knew that Peter’s moans got more and more desperate.

Finally, however much time had passed, Peter grabbed at Neal’s hair, trying to yank him off.

“Neal, _fuck_, I’m gonna—“

Neal took Peter in as far as he could go and started to swallow just before Peter let out a yell and he felt Peter explode down his throat. Neal’s own moans were garbled, and, before he could even reach a hand down to move things along or stop them (he wasn’t sure which), he was emptying himself all over the sheets.

Once the aftershocks had passed, for both of them, Neal crawled back up the bed and slid himself into Peter’s side, resting his cheek on Peter’s chest. Peter’s arm came up around his back, fingers trailing on his shoulder and arm.

“Damn,” said Peter. “That was…”

He grabbed Neal’s chin and tilted his head up, claiming a kiss. Neal smiled against his mouth, his eyes sliding closed.

Peter’s other hand wandered down Neal’s stomach. “Let me take care of you,” he said.

Neal chuckled. “Too late,” he said. He blinked his eyes open in time to catch Peter’s surprised
look.

“Seriously?” asked Peter.


He had a lot to think about, that was for sure. But at the moment, his pleasure-fogged brain told him not to worry about any of it. He obeyed.

* WC – WC – WC – WC – WC – WC – WC *

Saturday, July 3, 8:40AM

When Peter woke up for the third time that morning, he had an armful of snoring Neal Caffrey, and that sent a warm, contented feeling through his chest.

He blinked around the room, at the sunlight fighting its way past the edges of the window shade. He smiled at pieces of discarded clothing. He noticed the small signs that this room was becoming a place where someone lived rather than where they were staying: Neal’s phones resting on the nightstand, some scraps of paper on the dresser, the half-open closet door revealing a row of immaculate suits and a line of shiny shoes.

That was comforting, as well.

Of course, it could all come to an end if he didn’t succeed on Wednesday at the arbitration. Even the thought of that possibility made his stomach roll.

Nope, he decided. He tightened his grip on Neal. Not going to happen. He wasn’t about to let Neal go, not when he had just discovered this… this.

He heard a small chime – a text message. That might have been what woke him in the first place. Carefully, so as not to disturb Neal, he reached out and snagged his phone from the nightstand, checked the time, and then glanced at the message. It was from his wife.

Hi there! Are you guys up yet? I’ve got a few questions for Neal.

Peter furrowed his brow, wondering what kind of questions she might have. He struggled to unlock his phone and type a reply one-handed.

I’m up. What kind of questions?

After a moment, his phone chimed again.

Can I call?

Peter considered for a moment, whether it would be better to wait until he wasn’t lying naked in bed with his inmate. Would it be awkward? Not more or less awkward than the initial conversation had been, he figured. Also, he wasn’t really ready to slip away from Neal, yet. And if there was any chance that this was going to work going forward, they all had to get comfortable with it.

He swallowed back his nerves and responded.

Yes. Love you.

He glanced down at Neal. El had questions for him, so Peter should probably wake him up and warn him. He squeezed Neal’s shoulder.
“Neal,” he said softly. “Wake up.”

Neal made a noise and burrowed closer, so Peter tried again, his voice a little louder.

“Neal. You need to wake up.” Peter slid his hand down to cup Neal’s ass, and gave it a hard pinch. Neal sat up with a yelp.

“What the hell?” he asked, his voice rough and heavy. He rubbed his ass and glared down at Peter. Peter laughed and shrugged. “You’re hard to wake up,” he said.

Neal rolled his eyes and settled back in, closing his eyes. “I don’t want to wake up yet,” he said.

“We have to,” said Peter.

“Why?”

At that moment, Peter’s phone rang. He held it up for Neal to see the incoming call.

“Someone is calling to talk to us.” He moved his thumb to answer the call, and Neal grabbed at his wrist, eyes wide.

“Wait,” Neal said. “Let me get out of your way.”

He moved to untangle himself from the bedding, looking like he was planning to flee, but Peter wrapped an arm around him and pulled him back in.

“She’s calling for both of us,” he said. “Stay.”

Neal stilled. “Are you sure?”

Peter shrugged. “No, but…look. This is a thing. And I don’t know about you, but I want it to continue being a thing. Is that what you want?”

Neal hesitated a second, and then nodded. “You know I do.”

“So…we’ve got to deal with this at some point.” He grimaced. “Even though I’d rather pull my eyebrows out one hair at a time.”

Neal tensed, but didn’t retreat. Peter swiped at the screen, and then hit the button for the speaker. “Hi, Hon,” he said.

“Hi, Hon.” El’s voice filled the room, bright and cheerful. Then she laughed. “Satchmo, stop that. He heard your voice and is trying to get at the phone.”

“Hey, Satchmo,” said Peter, smiling. “Are you being a good boy?”

“He’s being an active boy,” said El. “He sure does love the size of my sister’s yard.”

“I can imagine,” said Peter. “All that space and no leash.”

“So.” El sounded hesitant, as if she wasn’t entirely sure what words to use for what she was about to say. “How was your night?”

Peter closed his eyes. *Very subtle, Hon*, he thought. Well, he did want to get this over with.
“It was a good,” he said. He ran a hand up Neal’s spine, feeling the kid shiver slightly. “Very good.”

There was a pause. Thankfully, it only lasted a few seconds before El started laughing again. “Oh, god,” she muttered. “This is completely awkward, isn’t it? Is he there with you now?”

“Yes,” said Peter. “Actually, you’re on speaker. Sorry, I should have told you.”

“Well, that’s okay. You are, too. Hi, Neal,” she said.

Peter glanced at Neal, and grinned at how he had flushed a deep red from his cheeks, down his neck, and onto his chest.

“Hi, Elizabeth,” Neal choked out.

“I’m glad you’re both here,” she said, breezing past the obvious tension. “Because I’m in the middle of planning some things and need some information from you.”

“What kind of information?” asked Peter.

“Actually, it’s Neal I’m interested in at the moment. Neal, I’m putting together a celebration for next weekend, and realized I have no idea who you might want me to invite for you. I’ve got the usual suspects, of course: Diana, Clinton, Hughes. And I imagine Mozzie, but I don’t have his contact info or really know whether he would come. But is there anyone else I should invite? Any other friends?”

She sounded very businesslike, and Peter realized she had gone into event planner mode.

“Hold on a second,” he said. “What exactly are you planning?”

“Just a small party, at our place, for Saturday night. I figured since my birthday got a little buried, and since we’ll be celebrating Neal staying with us, and since the last few weeks have been a little rough, we could all use the festivities. Is it a bad idea?”

She suddenly sounded unsure of herself. Peter was about to reassure her, when Neal piped in.

“Elizabeth, I appreciate the sentiment, but it might be a little premature. We don’t know…” he trailed off, and Peter watched with concern as he took a breath and gathered himself before continuing. “I mean, even if we succeed on Wednesday it won’t be final. But you should absolutely plan a birthday party. Tell me how I can help, since it’s my fault your birthday plans got destroyed.”

Peter sighed. “When we win on Wednesday, Friedrich will have almost no chance on appeal. It’s too much of an uphill battle from there. El, I think it’s a great idea.”

“Oh, good,” she said. “Neal, you have got to stop apologizing for things that aren’t your fault. Now, who should I plan to invite for you?”

Neal glanced at Peter and grimaced. “Just Mozzie,” he said. “I can tell him about it. I’m guessing Peter wouldn’t love it if I started pal-ing around with too much of the criminal element so soon.”

Peter flattened his palm against Neal’s back. He wasn’t sure why that made him feel both proud and fiercely possessive.

“If you have other close friends like Mozzie that you want to invite—“ he began.
“No,” said Neal. “Better not. Mozzie is good enough. And thanks, Elizabeth. This is sweet of you.”

“My pleasure,” she said. “So I’ll take care of this. Is there anything that I can help you two with from afar? For the arbitration?”

“I don’t think so,” said Peter. “We’ve got the team on it.”

“One more thing,” said El. “You two don’t have major plans around eleven this morning, do you? Think you can be up and dressed by then?”

This time it was Peter’s turn to flush. “Yes,” he managed. “Why?”

“I made an appointment for Neal,” she said, sounding secretive and delighted at her own cleverness.

“El, I don’t think it’s a good idea for us to leave the house,” said Peter. “I’m just concerned about —“

“You don’t have to leave,” said El. “They are coming to you. Just be ready, and let them in, and do what they say.”

Peter and Neal exchanged a glance. “Uh, Elizabeth? What exactly sort of people are these?” he asked.

She giggled. “You’ll see. I’d better go. I’ll let you two get back to your…morning.”

Peter choked, and Neal ducked his head. “Thanks, Hon,” he managed.

After they had hung up, Peter shifted until he was lying on his side, facing Neal. Neal looked back at him, amusement and embarrassment warring in his eyes.

“So. That was…”

“Surprisingly easy,” said Peter. He felt a wave of gratitude that she was treating this the way she was. It made it…easier, somehow…for him to act like this wasn’t the biggest thing that had ever happened to him. He leaned forward and captured Neal’s lips. “Thank god, because if it wasn’t… I’m not sure how I’d handle backing off.”

Neal blinked at him, and grinned. “Now that you’ve experienced sex with a guy, you can’t give it up?”

Peter snorted. “I’ve had sex with guys before,” he said. “I was talking about you, specifically.”

“Really?” Neal’s eyes lit up with interest. “I had no idea. When?”

“High school and college,” said Peter. “I figured out I was bisexual pretty early on.”

“Hmm.”

“Hmmmm? What does that mean?” asked Peter.

Neal laughed. “Nothing. You just don’t seem the type. I thought you were having an internal crisis about being attracted to a man.”

“I was having an internal crisis about being attracted to you. The fact that you’re a man wasn’t the part I was struggling with. It was the whole ‘I’m married and I have too much power’ thing.” Peter
frowned. “What about you?”

“What about me?” asked Neal.

“I sort of assumed that you’ve…” Peter trailed off and gestured with his hand.

“Yes, Peter. I’ve slept with men before. Although…” Neal looked off into the distance.

“Although what?”

Neal shook his head. “Nothing,” he said.

Peter was about to protest, but Neal’s mouth was suddenly on his again, and he forgot what he was about to say.

They kissed for a while, lazily. It was nice to not feel urgent and pressed.

Peter recalled the night before, Neal’s desperation to speed along once they got started, and how Peter had had to physically slow them down. It bothered him. Neal hadn’t been himself in that moment. Or, rather, he had been lost in his own head, not experiencing the actual moment but something else entirely.

It worried Peter.

Just like it worried him that Neal had slipped into sub-drop after they were done. It elevated his concerns that the power dynamic was too naturally imbalanced for this to be good for Neal.

There was something else about it that bothered him. He couldn’t quite put his finger on it. It hovered just outside of his reach. Something about Neal’s reactions, both last night and in the days leading up to it…something that Peter knew was lurking beneath the surface.

He would find out what it was. For now, he wanted to make Neal happy, and if the soft sighs he was making were any indication, at the moment at least, Neal was happy.

He was also glad that El was planning a party for Neal. The kid still seemed so confused that anyone would voluntarily do anything for him, and it broke his heart. It was too bad Neal didn’t have more friends he would be willing to invite, but Peter agreed it was probably better to stick with Mozzie. Mozzie was bad enough, but at least he seemed harmless. Who knew what other people Neal would consider as friends?

A thought struck Peter suddenly, and he pulled back, smiling at Neal’s grumbled protest.

“Hey,” he said. “I was just thinking—“

Neal frowned. “You were thinking? Then I wasn’t doing it right. Let me try again.”

Peter chuckled. “No, it just popped into my head. What El asked you, about inviting friends to this party.”

“Peter, it’s not a big deal. You wouldn’t want me to invite anyone else I know. Besides, it would blow my cover as an informant if they knew I was living with an FBI agent.”

“It’s fine, and you’re right about that. But it occurred to me that we’re investigating Friedrich by chasing down his money. I wonder if there’s anyone else who might have firsthand knowledge about any of his dealings.”
Neal rolled onto his back and ran a hand through his hair. “Well, he’s got to have people working for him. But which ones would know about something shady, that would be like looking for a needle in a haystack, wouldn’t it?”

“What about other inmates?”

“Others…like me, you mean?” Neal pursed his lips. “I guess it’s possible someone might have seen something. But I don’t know any others. The only ones I saw besides me were Chloe—“

“The maid,” said Peter.

“Yeah. And…Brian. There wasn’t anyone else there, that I saw.”

“Hmmm.” It was Peter’s turn to frown. “Records indicate that Friedrich purchased eight Contracts after ESIA passed.”

“I didn’t see eight,” said Neal. “Even if there are others somewhere, if they’re currently owned by Friedrich, they won’t be allowed to talk. It’s only been six months since the law passed. You think it’s likely any of them are free?”

Peter shrugged. “Maybe. He bought you with only four months left on your Contract. Maybe he bought other short-term Contracts as well. It’s worth looking into, at any rate.”

Neal was quiet. Peter watched him a minute. “Hey,” he said. “Everything okay?”

Peter’s concern grew as Neal blinked and refocused on Peter, then flashed him a brilliant smile. “Fine,” said Neal. “It’s a good idea.”

Fine. There was that word again, the signal that things were not fine. Peter was more sure than ever that there was something here that he just wasn’t seeing clearly, something under the surface that Neal was desperate to keep hidden. He debated with himself about whether to push or let it go for the moment. As if Neal could read his mind and wanted to distract him, the kid slid his body back into a tantalizing position and met Peter’s mouth with his own.

Peter let it go on for a minute, then reluctantly pulled his head to the side. “Neal,” he said.

Neal contented himself with tasting the underside of Peter’s jaw and licking down his neck.

“We have to get moving,” Peter said, wishing it weren’t the case.

Neal pouted. Peter couldn’t help but grin. Neal had quite a pretty pout. It made his chest swell with affection, and he gathered the kid close.

“El made that mysterious appointment. We should shower.”

“Together?” Neal sounded hopeful.

“Better not,” said Peter, with a sigh. “But later, I promise.”

Neal groaned and shoved himself away from Peter, rolling off the bed and onto his feet. “Fine,” he said. “I’m starving, anyway.”

“Go, shower,” said Peter. “I’ll meet you downstairs in a bit and I’ll make you breakfast.”

Neal raised an eyebrow, overdoing his skeptical expression. “You? Make breakfast?”
“I can make things,” said Peter.

“Edible things?” asked Neal. He yelped and dodged out of the way when Peter threw a pillow at him.

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