Replay

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Summary

As well as going after the Raphael painting, Agent Kramer goes after something else. A safety deposit box at a bank. A place where Neal hid something he never wanted to see again. And he's going to use it to get Neal to DC.

Notes

Box of Problems: Replay

Instead of going after the Raphael at the end of Season 3 (White Collar), Agent Kramer goes after something else. A safety deposit box at a bank. A place where Neal hid something he never wanted to see again. Takes place after the final season of Chuck.

Notes: This is me tackling a previous story for the second time. I had some different ideas recently of another direction I could have taken my old story 'Box of Problems' in (Box of Problems is only posted on FF.net). So, here it is, the same idea, different execution. You don’t have to read Box of Problems as this is an entirely different story just using the same old summary.
Chapter 1

Neal watched as Peter walked into the building to talk with the people of the board who were going to decide Neal's fate; freedom or more time on the anklet with the FBI. There was a light feeling to Neal's body and chest.

As he said to Peter, 'it doesn't matter...with or without my anklet, come Monday morning, I'm gonna step off that elevator on the 21st floor and go to work.'

Kramer walked into the building with a couple of agents behind him. The agents stood guard at the entrance, a move which immediately made Neal tense.

"Kramer," Neal greeted. "Can I help you?"

"We'll see," Kramer responded. He lifted up the box he was carrying. A simple safety deposit box. "I managed to get the bank to give this up. It's interesting how much pull one FBI agent can get. But you'd know all about that, don't you, Bryce?"

The name made Neal's blood run cold. How had Kramer found out? Neal had been careful to keep his lives separate. There should be no connection between Neal Caffrey and Bryce Larkin.

"I see you're confused. How about we go back to your apartment and talk about this?"

The last thing Neal wanted was to get in a car with Kramer. However, he didn't have a choice. Kramer knew about Bryce and now Neal had to figure out how much the agent knew.

Kramer held the box close. It was the result of months of searching and numerous favours. He had finally managed to track Neal's last movements before he was arrested. One of those movements was to place a box at Manhattan Mutual Bank for safekeeping. Kramer could easily believe the contents of the box and the story they told.

He wanted Bryce Larkin; more commonly known as Neal Caffrey, far away from Peter and El. The ex-con and spy led Kramer up to his apartment and motioned for Kramer to sit at the table. He refused, setting the box on the table but not taking his hands off it.

"So, what's in there?" Neal asked in an oblivious way.

"I think you already know," Kramer responded. He hated playing games. He was no good at it as he came across too strong. He also preferred to get right to the point. However, he would play if Neal wanted to play. He could corner the rat if he had to.

Opening the box, Kramer pulled out the contents, placing each item in front of Neal.

First came an ID labelled 'Danny Brooks'. It sported Neal's face and looked normal, even if the photo featured a bright and happy high school kid.
The next item was silver, round and locked. It looked like a miniature space saucer.

"What's that?" Neal asked.

"I think you know," Kramer said with a raised eyebrow. Neal was good at this. He didn't even flinch upon seeing his spy will. Perhaps because he knew Kramer couldn't get it open. "It's connected to this." Kramer pulled out the second ID from the box. The one which read 'Bryce Larkin'. The one which had been issued by the CIA for one of their agents. "Bryce Larkin, CIA agent. Don't bother with lies about how he's not you, the resemblance isn't the only connection I've found."

Neal remained silent. There were many situations he could talk himself out of but he needed more information. Instead, he looked over the remains of his previous lives.

"Silence won't help. Especially since I want to discuss what happens next."

"Oh?" Neal questioned. "What happens next?"

"I don't want the CIA anywhere near Peter. He's a good person. Has too much heart, too much faith in you."

Neal's own heart stopped when he heard Kramer's words. They were familiar. He had said the same thing, begged the same thing, back in college. For Chuck.

"You and I both know that the CIA doesn't just let agents go. Which means you're here for a reason." Kramer leaned forward. "I want you to abandon that and come to DC with me. In exchange, you will have the freedom to go on approved CIA missions. It's a good deal."

"You're telling me to abandon a CIA mission," Neal mused. "The CIA wouldn't send me on other missions after that, no matter how much freedom you give me."

"I've heard the rumours, Bryce Larkin. The CIA would be glad to have an agent as good at you off his leash."

"You're risking your career on this," Neal pointed out. "There's no way the FBI will approve this."

"You're right. I'll have to fudge some numbers but I'm sure we'll figure something out. If it comes to it, I'm willing to take the fall to keep you from hurting Peter."

Neal couldn't think of any counter. He couldn't say that he wouldn't hurt Peter as he already had in the past. He received a chance at commutation because El was kidnapped and they managed to arrest the person responsible.

"I'll talk to my superior about your offer," he said instead. "And I'll call you with her response."

"You have until this afternoon," Kramer informed him. "I'll be giving evidence which will get you to come with me to DC, without you having to agree. Take the deal, Bryce. It's the only way this'll work with you coming out on top."

Neal held back a growl as Kramer left. He took a couple of moments to calm down and put back on the cool face of Bryce Larkin, spy. Then he called Beckman.

"Take the deal," Beckman said.

"Really? We don't even know Kramer's true motives," Neal stalled.
"You can figure that out when you're in DC. Having another set of hands to send out is something we could use right now. We need Bryce Larkin back and Kramer is giving us the chance to get you back without having to burn Neal Caffrey."

It would feel like betraying Peter. Neal thought it but he didn't say it. What should it matter to him? It wasn't like he had hesitated to betray people before when it was in their best interest. What was one more name to that growing list?

"Agent Larkin," Beckman said. Neal raised his gaze from the ground and gave her his full attention. "This means more missions. I think some active service will do you good."

"Of course," he responded. Beckman wasn't the type to add comments to soften the blow of tough choices so there wasn't any other response he could give. The moment the screen went dark, Neal let loose with a heavy sigh.

Beckman was right. Kramer was right. Just because he didn't want to do it, didn't make it a horrible idea.

Neal reached for the phone and called Mozzie, letting him know that they needed to talk.

Mozzie sat silently across from the Neal. Neal didn't know what to say so the air was heavy with his silence. All he knew was that he couldn't leave without letting Mozzie know.

"Kramer's won," he announced. "I'm going to DC."

"What?" Mozzie gasped. He was horrified. "We managed to keep the Raphael painting out of his hands and sure, it's going to be returned to it's rightful owners but sometimes you have to let the loot go. What else could Kramer pin on you?" A thought occurred to him while he was speaking. "And how do you know? The Suit just finished giving his speech to the board. Kramer goes on in half an hour, after the panel breaks for lunch."

"Kramer told me. What he has Moz, it's something I can't fight against." He could see the confusion on his old friend's face. But there wasn't much he could do beyond attempting to explain as best he could. "I'm going to DC to work with Kramer. It's already decided. I decided. I'm sorry."

Mozzie frowned at him angrily as he processed it. His face was like a storm cloud and Neal forced himself to commit it to memory. It was always easier to cut himself off from people once he reminded himself that they hated him.

Finally, Mozzie spoke. "I see." Then he left.

Neal breathed a sigh of relief. At least he had let Mozzie know before leaving. Mozzie would hopefully pass a message along to Peter and the rest of team, even if it was just through his lunches with Elizabeth Burke. Neal didn't intend to share his leaving with anyone else.
Neal stood before the panel. They announced that in light of recent evidence, he was going to be relocated to DC as Agent Kramer's CI. Neal's expression was flat as he thanked them for their time and walked out. His bag was sitting by the door, ready to go.

"I booked us tickets for a flight this evening," he said the moment he saw Kramer. He didn't even give the agent time to smile over his win before he was walking past and towards the door.

Kramer hummed thoughtfully. "That's good. Are you sure you don't want to say goodbye?"

Neal nodded before sliding inside a cab. Soon enough, they were on a flight, heading towards DC. Neal managed to get one last look at New York before it was swallowed up by distance and clouds. A towering city, it was difficult to believe he had only lived within a two mile radius within it. It didn't feel like it, even now. He actually missed the chafing of the anklet, removed by Kramer. Neither of them wanted Peter tracking them through it, although for different reasons.

"You'll move on," Kramer said to him. "My team's almost as good as Peter's."

Neal swallowed against the hot, burning feeling of bile in his throat.

Peter opened the door to Neal's apartment and looked around. When Neal hadn't returned after going to hear the verdict, they had gotten worried. It was then that the group learnt that Neal had been reassigned and was on his way to DC with Kramer. Peter didn't want to believe it. No one would tell him what Kramer had done to get the decision made in his favour. Not even Diana, who had been spying from within Kramer's team, knew what had happened.

They had been all set to win and someone had pulled the rug out from under them. The apartment was empty of human life. June was on some sudden 'holiday' because Neal had suggested it to her. The house only had two maids working right now and neither of them had seen Neal come or go.

"He took the money from his go bags but not his IDs," Mozzie announced from the doorway.

"Do you know where he went, Mozzie?" Peter demanded to know. Part of him hoped that Moz would tell him that Neal had run. Kramer only saw Neal as a criminal and Peter thought being on the run would be better than whatever awaited Neal in DC.

"I do. What are you going to do about it?" Mozzie asked, dancing around Peter's question.

"I need to know he's safe."

"He's with Kramer," Mozzie responded flatly. Testing him. Peter didn't blame him. Peter had brought Kramer into their lives and now, Kramer had taken Neal. Mozzie continued honestly, "he knew that his leash would be handed to Kramer before he even showed up to the hearing. Even so, he decided to go."

That didn't sound right. "Why would Neal go with Kramer?" Peter questioned in confusion.

"That is what I intend to find out. But it won't be easy. I'm going to call in some favours and fly to
California to get some help." Peter was confused by that. "I have no idea what Kramer had on Neal but it's something big. Something neither you nor I know about. We're going to need help to figure it out. The help I have in mind owes me many favours, can keep his mouth shut about whatever we discover and has access to information we can't even imagine."

It took Peter only a moment to make his decision. "I'm coming with you." It felt like it should have been a difficult decision to make. He hadn't spoken to El about it yet, although he knew she would support him. He would have to take days off from the FBI and Hughes would have an idea why. It also meant possibly ignoring some of the illegal stuff Mozzie was involved in.

But there was no way Peter was going to leave Neal high and dry like this. Neal trusted Peter with his life and had unwavering faith in him. There was no way Peter was going to let him down.

El had understood. Diana wished him luck. Jones would make sure that everything ran smoothly while he was gone. After a seven hour flight and a night of rest in a motel, Mozzie appeared outside Peter's motel room in a tropical shirt with a car he had somehow acquired.

Mozzie drove them to the location where they could meet his contact. Peter expected a dark alleyway, maybe behind a store or something. He wasn't surprised when they pulled up outside a Buy More but he was surprised when Mozzie walked right into the store. It was open and very white and green with short shelves so that they could almost see all around the store. There was a wall of TVs to Peter's left and a round counter in the middle of the store for the Buy More 'Nerd Herd'.

"Do we really need discount electronics?" he questioned. "What happened to your Russian surplus?"

"No questions, Suit!" Mozzie said, holding up a hand. He then turned to the nearest person in a green shirt. "I demand to see your Leader!"

Peter groaned. How was this supposed to help Neal? The employee wouldn't be able to help them when Mozzie was quoting lines.

To his shock, the employee understood. "Chuck? Uh, sure. He's behind the counter," the tall young man said, pointing towards the Nerd Herd desk.

"Chuck," Mozzie repeated in amusement. He motioned for Peter to follow him as he walked over to the desk and rang the bell. "I wish to speak to Chuck!"

A man with combed brown hair popped up from beneath the desk. He was dressed in the white shirt of the Nerd Herder and had a warm smile on his face.

"Present! How may I help you today?" He looked over them, still smiling.

Peter felt like he was in the wrong place. The very wrong place.

"Where is John Casey? He owes me favours and I wish to cash in."

Chuck's smile faded. "Uh, Casey? Favours? Please don't tell me he promised you a discount on a Beastmaster or something. We're really not supposed to do that, you know?"

"Not that kind of favour," Mozzie responded. Then, pointedly, he added, "Carmichael."

Chuck flinched so that he was standing straighter. It was only now that Peter noticed how Chuck possessed a tall and well-built figure. He was suddenly wary getting into a fight with this person, even if Chuck seemed a little spacey and nice.
"How do you know that?" Chuck asked.

"Nevermind that. I know a lot of things I shouldn't. And yet, I don't have all the information I require. Therefore, I require John's assistance."

Chuck sighed. "I'll summon him." He pulled out a hand radio and called Casey over.

Peter's first impression of Casey was that of a cop. Broad shouldered, proud and grumpy. He wondered how a person like this could possibly get along with Mozzie.

"Don't worry about his cop face," Mozzie said to Peter. "He has honour."

Casey grunted and glared at Chuck. Peter was impressed to see Chuck stand his ground. In fact, the Nerd herder seemed almost amused by their presence now that Casey was here.

"Winters," Casey greeted with a grumble. He looked at Peter for a moment before turning back to Mozzie. "That's not the Neal Caffrey you're always talking about is it?"

Peter's blanched. "No," he said quickly. "I'm Peter Burke."

"He's a suit. But a nice suit. Cares for Neal. Like me. Neal's why we're here."

Casey grunted.

"Is something wrong?" Chuck asked. "Because we can help."

"Shut it, Chuckles! Winters is not the kind of person we get involved with. He's a petty thief."

"I'm an information broker who specialises in criminals," Mozzie corrected. "And I've saved you more than once. A little respect would be nice."

"'Respect' and 'Casey' don't go together," Chuck commented. "And what's your problem?"

"Neal has gotten himself in trouble," Mozzie said. "An FBI agent has him on a short lead somehow and I need to know how so I can break him free."

"I'm just interested in getting Neal transferred back to New York," Peter said to them.

Chuck and Casey shared a look. "We're going to need more information than that," Chuck said.
Chapter 3

Chuck mused on all the information Mozzie had been willing to give them. Neal had been his 'student in crime,' later his partner in crime and a brilliant one at that. Until Neal got himself arrested chasing a girl.

Casey snorted at that part. He didn't have much interest in fools who got themselves in trouble over women. It was probably one of the reasons he both liked and despised Gertrude Verbanski. She could handle herself, although a little too well. She made up his fiercest competition.

"Neal joined the FBI to get out of prison which ended in his being transferred to DC under an Agent Kramer," Chuck summarised. "I feel like that's cutting out a lot of information."

"The FBI wouldn't transfer a CI without reason," Casey said. "They're not agents. Getting moved around isn't part of their job unless they're in danger. I doubt this Neal Caffrey was."

"So why move Neal?" Chuck posed the question towards Peter.

Peter explained about how he brought Kramer to New York in order to investigate Neal. He said it with regret, not looking at Chuck as he spoke of how Kramer's motives changed to taking Neal for himself.

"He's just another fool out to boost his case closure rate," Casey said. "They're everywhere in the FBI, Chuck. There's no reason to go after Neal."

Mozzie glared at Casey.

"Are you forgetting all the information I've passed to you over the years? Building plans, personnel files, and even information on Roark Industries. That was difficult to get."

"Roark was up to no good. This is just FBI agents trying to one-up each other," Casey countered.

"Regardless, you owe me," Mozzie said. "Especially for that time with the DEA."

"What time with the DEA?" Chuck asked in interest. Casey could practically see the kid's eyes light up.

"Fine," he said. There was no way he wanted Chuck knowing about that little mess up. If Chuck knew, then the little bearded gnome would know. If the gnome knew, then his daughter might find out. Even one person knowing was too many for his comfort.

"Follow me!" Chuck said, motioning deeper into the store. They followed him into the employee locker room.

"Is this okay?" Peter asked, looking at the lockers which lined the walls.

"It's fine. Chuck owes the place," Casey said.

"It's a secret though. I'm the secret owner," Chuck said as he put the code into his locker which caused them to swing out.
Peter sighed as he saw Mozzie light up at that and start asking Chuck questions about being the secret owner. Like, how did he acquire the building and why was it a secret?

Peter wondered if the stories about Russian businessmen who were actually British spies giving Chuck money as a wedding gift were true or not. The way Chuck told the story kind of reminded him of Neal. It sounded unrealistic but it could possibly be true. At least in Neal's case. Neal did some crazy stuff.

"I've never lied to you, Peter."

"Hey," Peter said to Chuck. "Do you lie?"

"That's a strange question," Chuck commented.

"He can't really lie," Casey answered. Chuck frowned at him.

"I can too! I just prefer not to." To Peter, he answered, "usually I only lie on missions. And to hide the spy operations taking place down here."

Wait, what? Spy operations?

Peter's jaw dropped as they walked out of the tunnel into a high tech hallway. It was dark and long with lights everywhere. It reminded him of a hanger.

A spy base. An underground spy base. Mozzie has brought him to a spy base. The little guy looked around at the high tech conference room with a wide grin. No doubt he was comparing it to the one the FBI had. Not that it mattered, it was the skill of the team which closed cases, not the fanciness of their office.

"I thought you hated anything to do with the government," Peter said to Moz as they sat down.

"Spies are different. They're on the inside. They know things, Suit," Mozzie said.

"That's right," Casey said in a growl. It seemed to be his normal way of taking.

It was Monday morning and Neal's first day at Kramer's office. It felt strange getting off an elevator for a floor which didn't belong to Peter's team. Neal felt a pang of homesickness. It would eventually fade or so he told himself.

"Hi Neal," a voice said the moment he got off. Standing off to the side was Melissa Matthews, FBI agent under Kramer. "Kramer asked me to give you a tour, since I know what you're like."

"Charming, witty and ready to get coffee from across the street for everyone so we don't have to drink the office stuff?" Neal questioned with a charming grin.

Melissa smiled back but it was a cool smile. She wasn't overjoyed to see him but she didn't hate him. "I was talking about your ability to con people. But if you're offering, maybe I'll take you up on the coffee thing."

"Sounds good." Neal reminded himself that it wouldn't be bad here. Although the other agents seemed to avoid him. In New York, the way Peter interacted with Neal told everyone that he was part of the team as well and should be treated as such. However, Kramer was keeping Neal at a distance and everyone had noticed. Kramer was basically saying to not let Neal in, to remember that he is a criminal.
Neal smiled at Melissa and let her lead him around. Then he went to get coffee for everyone.

It would all be okay. He was just used to Peter's way of doing things. He was just homesick. He had a similar reaction when he got Chuck kicked out of Stanford. He had missed his friend, the empty room too big and nights too quiet for his taste. But he had adjusted.

Work had helped. Neal returned to the office, handed out all the coffee and sat down at his desk. It was smaller and off to the corner. No one had bothered to clear it before he had arrived.

Sorting through the files gave Neal something to do while his brain kicked into gear. He read over a couple of cases, mulling the information over in his head.

At least Kramer seemed impressed when he handed over three cases, two of which he had solved and one which could be reopened.

"Already showing your worth, Larkin," Kramer commented with a grin.

"My name is Neal Caffrey," Neal corrected. He felt a pang of annoyance with Kramer. Peter would have known to not use an alias Neal wasn't currently using.

"Right. Good work, Caffrey."

Neal resisted the urge to roll his eyes at the tone of dismissal in Kramer's voice. Adjusting was not going to be easy.
Peter spent the night at Chuck's place. He met Sarah, Chuck's wife and co-owner of their business. He didn't ask where Mozzie went and the little guy just disappeared after looking around the two story house with the picket fence.

The doorbell rang at five in the morning. It continuously buzzed until everyone was up. Mozzie pushed his way into the house, declaring that he had a plan.

"Go to DC and talk to your friend," Sarah said. "That's the plan. I don't know why you need us."

"Because we're going up against the FBI. To beat an alphabet agency, you go to an alphabet agency."

Peter swallowed down a flash of panic. Chuck's group were not only spies but government spies; for the sake of plausible deniability, he didn't want to know which government yet. What was Mozzie getting him into? He hoped it would be as simple as going to DC and getting Neal's custody transferred back over to him.

"It shouldn't be that difficult," Sarah explained, brushing a blond lock out of her eyes. "We can just throw some weight around until something happens."

"That's Sarah's job," Chuck explained, half-asleep on the table. "She'll go in and attempt to make the change."

"Time to pack our bags then," Sarah said. "Flight leaves in five hours. No non-stops so be prepared. We're going to be travelling for at least seven hours."

"Should have used some of the money to buy a private jet," Chuck muttered in a low grumble. Peter shared the sentiment. He also wasn't looking forward to spending so much time on a plane and in airports.

The second day went a little smoother than the first. Kramer greeted him and remembered to call him 'Caffrey'. Melissa seemed a little more willing to tell him where things were and Neal managed to finish clearing off the top of the desk they had him working at. He chose to focus on that and not the drawers filled almost to the brim with random items and knickknacks.

The apartment Kramer had Neal in was small and utilitarian. It wasn't as bad as the first place Peter had dropped him off at, however Kramer had forbidden him from moving. Kramer's thinking was that Neal was a spy and so, used to basically living out of a suitcase.

Neal suitcase was still packed, the small wardrobe empty of everything but Neal's dress shirts. He just wore white dress shirts and slacks to work, the kind which could be bought anywhere.

He missed June, his lovely apartment with the wonderful view and Bryon's well-fitting suits.

"I need a distraction," he decided as he looked around. His art supplies were in New York and he hadn't picked any up in DC yet. There was no TV, no bookshelf and not even a window for him to look out of. He grabbed his laptop and put it on the small, square table sitting in the middle of the
"Agent Larkin? What is it?" Beckman asked the moment the call connected. Had it been anyone else; except a member from Chuck's team, she would have left them waiting.

"Any missions for me?"

"Getting bored of the FBI already?" Beckman commented. It wasn't said in a teasing tone but it was her form of teasing. She typed away, looking for a mission that he could take.

The new anklet felt heavy around his ankle. The urge to run bubbled up in him again.

"Seems there is a mission you can take. In the DC area, there's supposed to be someone named 'Lisa Barrett'. She lives in the area but that's all the information we have about her."

"Why does she have the CIA's attention?" Neal asked.

"We believe she holds a dangerous piece of technology. A weapon which, in the wrong hands, could spell disaster. We need someone to go in and retrieve it."

"It would help to know what it is," Neal probed. Sometimes Beckman could answer the question and sometimes she couldn't.

"I'll send you what I know," Beckman said, signing off. Neal looked at the dark screen for a moment before closing the chat window. The files Beckman sent him detailed a device which looked a little like a thick pen. Except it was designed to plug into power points and computers and overload them to whatever level the user chose through twisting it. It could cause electrical fires, cut alarms and locks, and even cut power to whole buildings.

"That's insane," he muttered, knowing that such a device could be used both to kill and steal. He could have used it while stealing the Intersect. This could have taken out the whole building, burnt the intersec computers to a crisp and provided enough cover for him to get out without being shot.

All in a device the size of a pen. Dangerous. Neal wanted it off the streets. Destroyed if possible.

"Time to find out who you are, Ms Barrett," he mused, starting his search.

"I've extended your radius," Kramer said to him. "Keep that anklet on. We need to be able to track you if something happens."

"Right," Neal said hanging up. Kramer sounded pleased that Neal had found himself a mission to keep busy.

There wasn't much else he could do so he started searching for his target. She frequented a little coffee shop just outside Neal's radius. However, that radius was only for show now. Kramer's word didn't stop Neal from checking the anklet as he moved outside the invisible line. However, the light didn't change. It seemed the FBI agent had kept his promise to allow Neal freedom for his missions.

"I guess there is one benefit to this new arrangement," he muttered to himself as he continued on to the cafe.

Neal ordered a coffee, pulled out a book and sat at a table. From the one picture the CIA had, Lisa Barrett was a thin and small woman with curly brown hair. She would be difficult to pick out of a crowd because of her height but it was that which made her more recognisable.
He read and kept an eye out as customers came and went. Finally the figure he expected walked through the door. Ms Barrett ordered her afternoon snack and moved to sit down. Neal had already been standing and 'accidentally' bumped into her. Her food fell to the ground, as did Neal's empty coffee cup. The cup shattered and Neal's arms wrapped around Lisa, pulling her slightly away from the shards and helping them keep their balance.

"Sorry!" he said quickly, letting go and stepping back. He eyed the mess on the floor. "I'll pay for that. I can't believe I was so clumsy. And I've already had my coffee for today too."

Lisa sighed and brushed her hair out of her eyes. "Whatever. It's fine."

"I insist. Let me replace your meal." Without another word, Neal reordered her meal and then set on clearing up the pieces of his shattered cup safely.

He could see her begin to relax as he moved to give her space and cleaned up the mess instead of flirting with her.

Fifteen minutes later, Neal left with her number and a promise to meet for coffee the next day after work. She would probably look into Benjamin Cooper but she wouldn't find anything that he hadn't already told her. Like how he had worked in politics for a while in New York but had quit and now was in political journalism, uncovering corruption.
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

You might have noticed that I deleted the previous 'Chapter 5'. Honestly, it was filler and not very interesting, didn't progress the plot and actually locked me out of things I had planned for later on. I came to my senses a little too late (considering it was already posted when I fully realised this) and had a tough choice to make. Do I work within the issues I had made for myself or do I delete the chapter and try again?

Usually I choose the former and work with the issues I've made for myself. However, for the first time in all my time of writing fanfiction, I deleted the chapter to try again. Hopefully you enjoy this version more than the previous. If you hadn't had a chance to read the previous, that's okay, you didn't miss anything.

Chapter 5

Neal's head throbbed. His shoulders ached and he could feel rope rubbing against his wrists. Last thing he remembered was walking home after meeting with Lisa when someone jumped him.

Who? And why?

He felt stupid. Jumped in the middle of a busy DC street? Neal should have been able to defend himself.

"Awake are we?" a familiar voice said. It was now that Neal realised he was blindfolded.

"Lisa?" he questioned. He tested the bonds. "I really prefer to leave the kinky stuff for the third date."

"Of course, a smart mouth. Did you also take Roan Montgomery's course? Figures."

Actually, Bryce hadn't. But he wasn't about to give up the oblivious role just yet.

"Who? Is he a college professor or something?"

"Don't play confused civilian, Bryce dear. You're just not that good at it."

Neal's heart stopped. She knew. Somehow, she had made him. But how?

"How?" He disliked it when asking was his only option.

The back of her fingers brushed against his cheek. "I've heard about you. In fact, the person I took this little device from had an interesting little file about you."

Neal managed to keep from commenting but she caught his surprise anyway.

"I wonder, who hired Verbanski Corp to look into you?"
Verbanski? Oh great. Neal remembered having a run in with the tough woman who ran Verbanski corp. She had shot him in the leg and almost messed up his mission. She reminded him enough of Casey that Neal knew he never wanted to see her again.

"You stole from Gertrude Verbanski?" he questioned, impressed in spite of the situation. He guessed that the General had sent him after Lisa, if that was her real name, basically to help out and one up the independent security company.

"Of course. It's not as difficult as everyone makes it out to be," she bragged. Neal rolled his eyes behind the blindfold. Good criminals didn't need to brag. The legends about them told anyone everything they needed to know.

Right now, he needed to stay alive. Which meant he needed to make himself either useful or someone to prove something to.

"I've forged bonds which people said couldn't be forged. I've forged paintings from all over the world, some still hanging in museums. I stole the Antioch manuscripts. I've skydived off a New York building. Nothing is ever as difficult as everyone makes it out to be." There was a moment of silence and Neal decided to add, "I may have originally been Bryce Larkin but I'm the one who made Neal Caffrey."

Lisa hummed. "I guess that explains why you're still with the FBI. We cut your anklet by the way."

"I noticed."

"I figure there must be some information you can give me which will help in the future. Especially if the rumours and stories about you are true," she continued. That explained why he was still alive. "After all, everyone talks eventually."

Neal was looking at torture in his future unless a rescue got here soon. He might as well start spilling now as it was unlikely that anyone would notice him missing, let alone come for him.

Peter looked around the inside of the van. Somehow, seeing the gutted inside of the van was unnerving. It made him feel like the outside could be torn apart easily. That they weren't as safe as they thought they were.

Chuck had set up a fold-out table and put a computer on it. The computer was connected to a camera on Sarah's person as well as cameras placed on the van for them to monitor the area around them.

The only high point was when Mozzie looked set to complain but paused when he realised it was all Russian military surplus technology. Chuck later commented to Peter that Casey had warned him about some of Mozzie's more... unique aspects.

"Besides, the Russian tech really was cheap. I think I might use it again."

When Sarah opened the van door, Peter was relieved. Let this be over with quickly. The agents and Mozzie were unnerving him. It didn't help that Peter felt like he wasn't really contributing anything of worth to helping Neal.

"Well?" Casey asked, sounding as hopeful as Peter felt.

"I couldn't find Neal. No one's seen him today," Sarah said with a confused frown. "Not even Kramer. He seemed certain that Neal would turn up though."
Peter muttered a little curse under his breath at his former mentor. Kramer should know better than to leave Neal to whatever he was doing. Even if he was just painting a picture and didn't feel like working, Neal still had to honour the contract and come into work.

"I did find Neal's address," Sarah said. It hadn't been difficult to get into the employee and consultant files.

"Why do I get the feeling our job just got harder?" Chuck questioned with a heavy sigh. He closed the laptop and put it away in a heavy case.

"We have an address," Mozzie reminded him. "Let's start there."

"Stay," Casey ordered in a gruff voice as Chuck moved to get up. "I'll drive."

"Is there a reason you don't want him driving?" Peter asked. Casey was silent as he climbed into the front and pulled the van into gear.

Peter glanced over at Mozzie. Mozzie's lips were pressed tightly together and his gaze was distant. The little guy was worried. Same as Peter. They knew Neal. He wouldn't miss a day unless there was something important which needed doing.

The apartment was small. The kitchen, living and dining rooms were all one room with a bedroom and bathroom off to the side. Sarah walked around the room, starting over at the couch, through the kitchen and finishing at the dining area where there was a table and bookshelf. She opened the cupboards, lifted the cushions and took books off the bookshelf one by one.

While she was doing that, Peter and Mozzie had walked into the bedroom. The bathroom was behind one side of a two part sliding door and was just as compact as the rest of the apartment. The worst part was not that this apartment was tiny but that anyone could be living here.

"There are no art supplies," Peter mused as he opened the other side of the sliding door to reveal the wardrobe. The wardrobe was mostly empty, except for a couple of white shirts and slacks. Even Neal's shoes were gone. If something had happened to him, it hadn't happened here.

"He's living out of the suitcase," Chuck suddenly said, surprising them both. Peter hadn't heard him approach. Indeed, the suitcase was sitting open under the hanging shirts and filled with changes of clothes and other items.

"He was a con on the run for a while," Peter informed Chuck. He knew it was a halfhearted lie at best. Neal had wasted no time getting comfortable at June's. "He never should have left New York," he muttered.

"Correct," Mozzie stated before turning away and heading back out.

"Get out here, idiots," Casey growled from the doorway, "Sarah's found something."

There was a loose floorboard in the lounge area. Sarah pried it up and pulled out a laptop bag.

"A laptop?" Peter questioned.

"Neal owned one in New York but that's not it," Mozzie stated. He took the laptop from Sarah and placed it on the table. "Let's see if he used the same password."

"Wow. That's a little unsafe," Chuck commented as the computer accepted the password.
"Okay, what now?" Casey asked. He didn't like all this computer stuff. He preferred having action and enemies to shoot.

"Check what programs have been used recently," Chuck said to Mozzie.

"I have done this before," Mozzie countered as he did so. "An internet browser, we'll have to check his history, and a video chat program I've never seen before." Neither Mozzie nor Peter missed the sharp intake of breath from the agents behind them.

"What is it?" Peter asked.

"Nothing. It's just a familiar program, that's all," Chuck said, waving off their concerns. "It might be good to open it and see who Neal's last call was to?"

"As long as we don't accidentally call Phillip Kramer," Peter commented.

"What do you take me for?" Mozzie questioned as he started up the program. "I'm not going to alert the enemy to our presence." The program started and Mozzie stared at the number on the screen. "I have no idea who that is. Which is saying something."

"Mozzie is good at remembering things," Peter explained, causing the little guy to bristle.

"Not just 'good', 'perfect'. I have perfect recall, Suit!"

"Call that number," Chuck said, reaching for the mouse. Mozzie moved it away but did as asked.

"It's asking for another password."

Chuck reached over and typed his own. The call went through.

Diane Beckman's annoyed face appeared on the screen. She raised an eyebrow at seeing Chuck's team, Peter Burke and some odd little man in glasses instead of Neal.
"FBI Agent Peter Burke," Beckman stated, "why are you in DC?"

"General..." Chuck started. Beckman held up a hand.

"I can guess why you're there Bartowski. I'm concerned about the unauthorised FBI presence."

"Why does Neal have a laptop that connects to the CIA?" Peter questioned.

"Neal is the CIA!" Mozzie said before ducking under the table. "She's seen me!"

"Duh," Casey grunted as it was obvious. He decided to explain in order to get this over with. "The little guy hiding on the floor asked us to assist him in helping his friend, Neal Caffrey, move from DC to New York."

"He's just concerned about his friend," Sarah pointed out.

"Although I'm thinking this CIA thing probably has something to do with why Neal was willing to go with the FBI's flow," Chuck finished.

Beckman seemed surprised by something since she didn't immediately respond and was thinking.

"What did you mean when you said you can guess why Chuck's here?" Peter asked.

"Nevermind that," Beckman said. "Chuck. You said you were here because of the FBI agent and the other guy?" Chuck nodded. "It has nothing to with Neal Caffrey aside from that?"

"Yes, General why-?"

"I want you all to step back and leave this alone," she interrupted, sternly. "Leave Neal Caffrey to us."

"We will not!" Mozzie pulled himself up so he was standing before the screen. "I will not leave mon frere to the whims of the government!"

"Neal is my friend," Peter stated, "and I came here to talk to him and make sure he is alright. CIA or not, my objective hasn't changed."

The room was charged, ready for a fight.

"Does the CIA know he's missing?" Sarah asked suddenly.

Beckman paused. "He's missing?" And the aggressive bubble popped. The ball was back in their court.

"He didn't come to work at the FBI office today," Peter informed her.

Beckman's expression grew tight, her lips pressed in a thin line. She typed something on a screen they couldn't see and frowned. "Agent Kramer extended his radius... he went to the coffee shop and then nothing."
"Nothing?" Peter demanded more information.

"The anklet stopped transmitting."

"What? Isn't something like that meant to trigger some red flags?" Casey questioned.

"Extending the radius can sometimes shut alarms off," Peter said. "I doubt Kramer's monitoring where he is or he would have realised by now."

"So, Neal's off anklet and missing?" Mozzie questioned with a sinking feeling in his gut.

"Why would Kramer do this?" Peter questioned.

"Because he knows that Caffrey works for us," Beckman said. "He found Caffrey's CIA badge and contacted us with a deal. Caffrey goes with him and he lets Caffrey off the leash for missions."

"Then, Neal's on a mission?" Sarah asked.

Beckman nodded and explained about Lisa Barrett, as well as Neal's strategy for approaching her.

"Neal. He should know better than to go in without someone backing him up," Peter muttered under his breath.

"We'll just have to find him," Mozzie said. "Send us the tracking data and we'll do the rest."

Beckman paused for a moment, as if she had something else to say. But she didn't say anything, choosing instead to send them the data and information on the mission.

Peter wasn't about to step on Kramer's toes. At least, not without letting the man know. So, while Mozzie and the CIA agents worked on locating Neal, he made his way back to the FBI. He was going to have a chat with his old mentor.

Kramer was sitting at his desk when Peter arrived, nose buried in papers. He glanced up for a moment, ready to give a quick dismissal to the person interrupting his work and obviously not expecting Peter to be there. He froze.

"Peter."

"Phillip."

"Why are you here?" The suspicious tone in Kramer's voice was enough to make Peter sigh.

"Why do you think?" he asked. "I'm here about Neal."

"Neal belongs here now," Kramer responded sternly. "He's not going back with you. And, Petey, I say this as a friend; cut the lead and don't get close to him."

"Because he's a con or because he's a spy?"

Now Kramer was the one to sigh. He filed the papers back into their folders and motioned for Peter to take the seat across from him.

"You found out. Now you know I was only trying to protect you. Having a spy near you means trouble. Neal's a trouble magnet."
"So are some FBI agents. FBI Agent Jack Franklin brought nothing but trouble but I still helped him. We even ended up on the run together." Jack Franklin had been looking into someone selling witness information, only to have to go on the run when he was framed for the very crime he was investigating. Peter had gotten caught up in it, to the point of having to go on the run with Jack and spend a night in one of Mozzie's safe houses. "Neal's done good work. I'm not going to discredit that just because some people hold prejudice against his previous means of employment."

Lines deepened in Kramer's face. It seemed he didn't have any counter to that.

"Where is Neal?" Peter asked. He wasn't able to access the tracking program at all, not that he expected it to give them anything when Beckman hadn't been able to get anything.

Kramer accessed the program and winced. "The anklet's been cut."

"How did you not get an alert?" Peter demanded to know.

"Neal can't be restricted by a radius while working for the CIA. I may have shut down all alerts until further notice as per my agreement with his bosses."

"And so you have no idea where he is now. CIA or not, that's your job on the line," Peter said. He didn't want to voice the horrible truth. If Neal turned up dead; Kramer would be off the hook unless someone raised stink. But that wouldn't bring Neal back.

"I knew my job was on the line when I took him in. But, I think this proves my point? It's dangerous around him. He hadn't even lasted a week here."

"Because he has no backup," Peter pointed out. "No agent, FBI or CIA, should go on a case without backup. Now, are you going to help us find him?"

"You can do it yourself," Kramer said. "If you've managed to figure all this out, then you don't need my assistance." He passed Peter a business card. "Although call me if you find you do."

"Fine." Peter took the card. It was better than nothing.

"Don't be surprised if Neal doesn't agree to come back," Kramer said as he left.

Peter wondered why he had finished with those words. It sounded like Kramer still knew something he didn't. Did Neal have another reason for coming to DC?

Neal's arms, legs and gut ached with remembered pain. Lisa hadn't touched his face, joking about how he should thank her for leaving him pretty, for now. She had burned his arms slowly, adding salt and pinching them just to make it hurt more. Little cuts littered his body. Two cuts across his left thigh from when he hadn't told her where the closest CIA safe house he knew about was. A punch to his still throbbing gut when he refused to give her any name beyond 'Neal Caffrey'. He caved and told her a couple of Neal's aliases. She would probably connect him to the FBI by the next day, if not faster.

His head hung low and he focused on breathing and thinking. There had to be a way out. Lisa had burned him a couple of times when he had spoken without being asked a question. The worst part was that she had kept his clothes on.

First there was a light press, then heat which kept growing. Finally, the heat would burn through the clothes and to the skin. That sensation caused him to cry out a couple of times. The burnt clothes stuck to his skin, continuing to heat the area for a while afterwards. Not to mention what skin and
scabs he might tear off when he finally pulls the grime clothes off.

The door opened and someone with a different walk to Lisa, a lighter but more certain stride, walked in.

The blindfold was pulled off and Neal squinted against the light in order to see who was standing before him.

"So you really are Bryce Larkin," Gertrude Verbanski mused in an amused tone. She was holding a gun in her hand and her predatory grin reminded Neal of Casey when he was about to shoot him.
"Where you expecting someone else?" Neal questioned.

"I know my research said that Neal Caffrey was Bryce Larkin but, there are some things which need to be seen to be believed."

Neal gave her a flat stare. Then he tugged pointedly at his bonds.

"Since you know all that, are you going to help me out?"

Gertrude hummed for a moment.

"Did Lisa show you the device at all?" she asked before pulling out a knife. Neal didn't know if it was a threat or if she was offering to free him.

"No."

Gertrude pressed the knife to his cheek. "Are you sure?"

Neal looked her in the eye and responded, "I haven't seen the device."

Gertrude huffed and cut his hands free. Then she dropped the knife to the floor.

"I think you can take care of the rest," she said. She moved to walk around the room, moving right towards the desk resting up against the fall. She pulled open the drawers and shoved her hands through them, looking for something.

Neal glared at the knife on the ground. It was a good thing Lisa hadn't tied anything around his waist. It made it a simple enough task to reach down and pick up the knife. As he sawed at the rope around his ankles, he could hear rattling behind him.

"Getting frustrated?" he questioned in amusement. He had an idea what Gertrude was looking for. He also had an idea how to find it. Too bad Gertrude hasn't asked where he suspected the device was.

"You know what I'm looking for," she responded sharply. "And you know that the General only sent you on this mission because she wants to owe me a favour. Too bad I had other plans in mind."

Neal stood up and stretched his legs. The cuts along his body stung and he felt a trickle of blood run down the back of his lower leg but everything worked fine. His arms were trembling, meaning guns were out of the question until he was a little stronger.

"How did you know I was here?" he asked Gertrude, who was checking under the desk for hidden drawers or taped envelopes.

"You're the agent, you tell me."

Gertrude probably hired the CIA, kept an eye out for their agent, which was him, and followed said agent until they could lead her to the culprit.
"I was the bait."

"A perfectly valid move. It even has a name; the magnet."

Neal knew that; it was also a move Casey preferred to use when working with a partner. He was really glad he worked with Peter; someone who had to be convinced to use moves like that. Even then, Peter would only agree if they could make the person who was 'the magnet' as safe as possible.

It also would have been nice to have been told. Neal looked around the room. A couple of pictures hung on the walls and there was the desk Gertrude was still searching. The wallpaper was a plain, but dirty cream colour and pealing in places. No windows and only one door. Neal looked over the four-legged chair he had been tied up on but it was a normal chair.

While it was highly likely that this was not Lisa's place, it was also likely that she hid the device here. After all, it wasn't on her person. Neal had already checked her bag while they had their coffee date.

Neal walked around the room a couple of times. He knocked on the walls, seeking out hidden spots. He kept his eyes and ears trained to the ground in case there was a hidden panel in the floor. He took the pictures off the wall, checking for wall safes behind them.

Nothing.

"Do you really think it's here?" he asked Gertrude.

She stood up and huffed. With her gun held firmly in her hand, she started towards the door. Neal waited until she left before putting the pictures back on the wall.

One of the frames was a generic wooden frame. However, it was also deep like a photo box even though the picture inside it was on a flat canvas. Neal undid the back and opened it up. Just as suspected, there was extra space in the back.

How Lisa thought he would miss something like that was beyond him. Maybe she thought that Neal Caffrey's skill was all rumour and espionage?

The device was in a small black box, similar to a pen box. The kind of box which made one think 'expensive' when they saw it.

"Hello there," Neal grinned as he pulled it out. He opened it and there it was. His true target, the device. He pocketed the device and put the box back.

Peter returned to the van to see Chuck with his head on the keyboard, groaning and a bottle of wine on the floor.

"Bout time you got here!" Mozzie scolded him.

"What happened?" he asked, motioning towards Chuck.

"That's classified," Casey said.

"Chuck managed to find Neal," Sarah said, moving into the driver's seat. "So hold on." Peter stumbled as the van roared to life and shuddered out into traffic. The bottle made a light tinkling sound as it rolled around.

"Fed's back," Casey checked off. "Got my gun." It wasn't a handgun but a gun with a scope. Casey had slung it over his back like a backpack. Peter felt a little nervous about it and wondered if Neal
felt this way around the FBI sometimes. It would certainly explain how he was vocal about guns. "Got my nerds."

"Nerds?" Peter questioned. As if they had practised, Chuck and Mozzie raised their hands. "Okay."

Mozzie explained, "we found a picture of the van which took him and Chuck managed to track it through the streets."

They had only managed to track it partway. Chuck entered street after street of orange brick apartments which barely rose more than three stories off the ground, warehouses and depots.

"And we lose them somewhere around here," he said, pulling up across the street from two brick apartment buildings, no different from all the others they passed, and a white warehouse.

"They're probably in the warehouse," Casey said.

"That's what they want you to think!" Mozzie said, jabbing a finger towards the gunman.

Chuck smiled at Peter. "We actually checked who the buildings are owned by. The warehouse belongs to a shipping company, one of the apartment buildings is registered to a Jerome A. Paton and the other building belongs to a shell company."

"So, he's probably in the one which belongs to a shell company," Peter said. Although that still left them in the dark about who was behind this. Unless they managed to get some evidence, Neal might have to worry about this person coming back again.

"Let's go," Casey said, opening the door to the van and creeping out.

"Mozzie," Peter started.

"Do you really think I'm staying here?"

"Someone has to make sure they don't get their hands on this van," Sarah said. "And we'll bring Neal back, I promise."

Mozzie huffed. "Don't make promises you can't keep, Mrs Spook." He turned to Peter. "You'll bring him back, won't you?"

Peter nodded. "I won't let anything happen to him."

Mozzie nodded and seemed content to let them leave. Peter followed up the rear with Chuck and Sarah in front of him and Casey leading in the front.
Neil slipped out of the room and into a hallway. There were scratched off signs next to the doors and, if it wasn't for the lack of natural light, he might have assumed this had been an apartment building. Gertrude was already out of sight, indicating that she had a better idea of the layout than he did.

If this had been a New York building, Neal would have had a better idea of how it was all set out. He was confused by the lack of natural light and how it was dark as many of the artificial lights were flickering or out.

There weren't many options on where to go. Neal decided to follow the path to his left and he started walking down it. It wasn't a long corridor, he could see a door at the end after passing three doors on the side. There was an alcove at the end, the walls parting a little wider to make a place before the door which led to a stairwell.

The stairs only went up, adding to Neal's unease. He couldn't help feeling like he had been herded this way. The hallway behind him was dark and seemed like endless doors. Checking each of those would take too much time and weren't likely to give him any positive results.

There was a fire extinguisher hooked to the wall, dim and dusty. It would do as a weapon.

Neal crept up the stairs, keeping close to the middle railing so that he would have some cover if discovered. Perhaps Lisa really was a lone agent, if there was no one else available to guard the building.

Chuck somehow became a master locksmith, able to pick the lock into the building just by looking at it and some wire. Peter was certain Neal would be impressed. The back door led through a tight corridor and then into a kitchen area.

"Man, why do we gotta make our own meals?" a deep voice complained.

"The lady's paying us to stay here and for the food. Maybe she figures we can take care of ourselves?" another voice responded lightly.

Both voices laughed.

Casey put a finger to his lip and crept forward. Chuck motioned for Sarah and Peter to stay where they were and followed Casey. Moments after they slipped into the room, there was the sound of
flesh hitting flesh and something else hitting someone.

Peter wanted to rush in, but Sarah shook her head. When everything was quiet, she slipped forward and Peter followed her.

On the ground were two thugs, their chests rising and falling.

"So, she's hired herself a guard," Casey mused with a savage grin. He held his gun ready. "This trip might be fun after all."

Peter wanted to ask whether anyone was going to die. However, he didn't know what he would do if the answer was 'yes'. Would he stop because of the risk to life or would he keep going because of the risk to Neal's life? Knowing meant making a more active choice to put Neal's life ahead of someone else's.

As if sensing his inner turmoil, Sarah placed a hand on his shoulder. "Don't worry about Casey. He knows what he's doing."

Chuck pulled out some paper. On it was a small, fuzzy version of the floor-plan. First, Peter noticed it didn't fit well on letter-sized paper. Second, he noticed that there were a lot of rooms for a three floor building.

"There's a basement area?" he questioned.

"Yep. It has only one way in and out as well as multiple rooms. They were used for storage, cleaning supplies and maintenance and keeping the hot water system out of the way, the usual stuff." Chuck smiled as he explained and Peter wondered just what it was that made him pleased about this place.

"How are we going to search all these rooms?" Peter asked instead.

"We're not," Casey said, as if it was obvious.

"We're not?" Chuck sounded surprised.

Casey sighed and walked over to one of the unconscious men. "We'll just ask these guys." He took one and slapped him. Peter winced.

"We'll wait outside," Chuck said, pulling Peter by the arm.

Sarah and Casey walked out a couple of minutes later. Chuck and Peter had walked all the way down the hall, out of range of the sound of slaps, low growled questions and cries of pain.

"Neal Caffrey is being held in the basement levels," Sarah said. "Their boss for this job said that he was a slippery one and could break out of a secure CIA facility if given the chance."

They all looked to Peter. Peter had to really think about that one. Neal had talked his way out of many situations and slithered out of airtight traps before.

"I guess it's possible?" he suggested.

The only way to the basement level was by a stairway in the lobby. Even if it wasn't a trap, it sure felt like one.

Casey insisted that they could handle it. Lisa had hired the 'suckers' off the street and was letting them stay in the building while they protected her and her possessions.
"How many goons did she hire?" Chuck asked.

Sarah shrugged. They had been unable to get that information from the guys they questioned.

Peter was right behind Casey as they moved forward, feeling like a character in a movie. He was with CIA agents, trying to find his CI, who was also a spy and they were in an apartment building filled with hired goons. In retelling this to El, he would need to find a way to make it sound like they were a lot more in control than they actually felt.

The lobby was at the end of the corridor.

It was a larger room, with stairs leading up to the next floor and doors leading around the building. One of the doors was labelled 'mailroom' and laughter could be heard behind it.

There was a counter to the side of the stairs, with hooks for keys on the wall behind it. Chuck commented that it would be difficult to get around if they needed a key for every door. Casey didn't want to hear it.

"Get behind the counter," Sarah said as the noise behind the door stopped. Something was happening. They made it around the counter as the door opened.

"You're being paranoid," a gruff voice said.

From the other end of a radio, another voice answered, "you said they didn't come back. So, I want you to search the whole building."

"They're probably just eatin' all our food," the voice said. "I'm tellin' you, we need a lock on that fridge."

"I'm on my way up. Start the search."

"Aye," the gruff voice huffed. He grumbled about having to leave his straight flush in poker to complete the search.

Peter grabbed his gun from the shoulder holster. If they were lucky, the men would split off and they could move, finding Neal and getting out of here.

'How many?' Sarah mouthed to Casey.

Casey held up three fingers. The sound of their footsteps started to spread out. There was a door next to the counter. It was under the stairs and was their goal. It lead to the stairs which went to the basement floor.

Unfortunately, that door opened now, a woman stepping out.

In an instant, Casey was pointing his gun at her and she was pointing her gun at him.

Sarah popped out above the counter and pointed her gun at one of the other men.

"Get up here, guys," Sarah said to them.

Chuck and Peter shared a look before Chuck jumped up, pointing a weapon at the other man. Peter followed suit.

"Seems we have a standoff," Lisa said. "You here for the agent or for Verbanski?"
"We're here because we were hired to be," Casey responded. "And you'll want to stop moving before my gun ends this standoff."

"No," Lisa responded. She turned to the men. "Shoot them."

"Can I make an offer?" Chuck said quickly. No one moved. "I could pay you whatever she's offering, right now. You know, to not kill us."

"That doesn't sound as fun," Lisa commented. One of the men nodded in agreement.

Casey cursed. Sarah tensed. Peter thought of El.
The door behind Lisa swung open. White mist and globs of something spurt out, spreading quickly and forming a distraction.

Sarah used the distraction, firing on their assailants. The men grunted as they went down with bullets in legs and shoulders. What followed was a round of tranq, fired by Chuck, sending them all into dreamland.

Meanwhile, Casey had punched out Lisa, who had been knocked forward by something ramming into her from behind.

The smoke cleared and Peter's brain finally caught up to the situation. They were okay.

"Oh thank goodness," he said, letting go of a breath he hadn't realised he was holding.

"Peter?" a familiar, but confused, voice said. Neal stood before them, white shirt ruffled, shoes gone and a fire extinguisher in his hands. His hair was a mussed mess and his face a little more slim and hollow than Peter remembered it. There also seemed to be patches of blood in his clothes.

Three names were said in response to Neal's arrival. One of Peter's 'Neal'. One was Chuck and Sarah's 'Bryce!' and one was Casey's mutter of 'Larkin'.

Neal's eyes went wide as arms wrapped around him and squeezed tight. The fire extinguisher clanged as it hit the ground.

Peter was slightly amused that Chuck had beaten him to hugging his friend. Although, he had a lot of questions, starting with 'Bryce'.

"Hi, Chuck," Neal said nervously, giving his long lost friend an awkward pat on the back. "How have you been, buddy?"

"Good, good. Still at the Buy More, although I own it now," Chuck said quickly, "but, let's talk about you, how are you alive?"

"It's complicated. Are you actually Chuck?"

Chuck said a sentence in a language Peter hadn't heard before. Neal laughed and responded in kind. Then Chuck said something else, pointing at the ring on his finger.

Neal's mouth dropped open and he grabbed Chuck's hand for a better look.

"Now way," he said. He turned to Sarah. "It's not a cover, is it?"

"No," Sarah responded with a small smile. She held up her own ring. "I consider Sarah Bartowski to be my name now."

"When she's not using the Carmichael name," Chuck said proudly.

"Awesome," Neal said with a grin. "You've certainly made a name for yourself!"
"What about you?" Chuck asked. "Suave confidence man? Able to steal anything if you put your mind to it?"

"Larkin in a nutshell," Casey grunted, thinking of the Intersect. He fiddled with his gun, which Neal eyed with suspicion.

"I'm not that great. I'm supposed to be on an anklet with a two mile radius."

"You have friends willing to fly across the country, twice, in order to help you," Sarah pointed out.

Neal turned to Peter, frowning a little. "How do you know Chuck and Sarah anyway?"

"I didn't. It was Mozzie."

"Moz? Moz is here?" Neal looked around.

"He's in the van," Sarah said.

Neal gave her a flat look. Because even he knew that anything could have happened by now. "Let's leave then. Make sure that van is still standing."

"What about the device?" Chuck asked. "Shouldn't we get it back?"

"Gertrude can take care of it." Neal shrugged.

"Gertrude's here?" Casey said, taking interest in this conversation for the first time. Neal frowned but nodded. "Downstairs?"

"Maybe. She used me as bait."

"Ah, the magnet."

"What's up with Casey?" Neal whispered to Chuck. Casey sounded almost, happy. Like when he nailed a perfect shot.

"He and Verbanski are dating," Chuck whispered back.

Neal's eyebrows rose. "Well, I am a bit of a romantic."

Peter snorted. "Understatement."

"Thanks, Peter," Neal quipped as he pulled out the device and tossed it to Casey. "Go get her. Try not to die though."

Casey nodded and went through the door to the basement.

"Should we back him up?" Sarah asked.

"I'm sure he can handle it. I didn't see anyone down there when I came up."

As they walked back, Neal hung back. Peter glanced back and then slowed his own pace to walk side-by-side with his ex-CI.

"I'm guessing you found out about my side-job?" Neal said.

"You mean Bryce Larkin? Oh yeah," Peter responded. "I can't believe you let Mozzie call me 'Suit'
when you're more Fed than I'll ever be."

It took a moment for that to sink in but, when it did, Neal laughed. Peter didn't seem upset at all!

"You're not mad that I basically lied to you for years?"

"It's better than finding another Steve Tabernacle or Gary Rydell. This ID comes with a badge and awkward reunions with old friends. I don't think I've ever seen you so tense when interacting with someone."

"Chuck and I have a lot of history. There's some bad history there too, mostly because of me."

"Looks like he forgives you."

Neal wondered about that. The hug seemed to suggest that Chuck might be over how Bryce messed in his life but at the same time, he could just be glad that Bryce hadn't died. Chuck wouldn't wish death to his worst enemy.

They approached the van. It was still standing and looked unharmed. Except all the doors were locked.

"What's the password?" Mozzie called out from behind the back doors. Sarah pulled at the latch again and the door barely budged.

"At least we got our money worth in this rental," Chuck announced.

Neal snorted and rapped on the door. Tap, tap, tap-tap-tap. "Come on, Moz. It's been a long day."

"Neal?"

The doors opened and Sarah immediately jumped up inside the van with a warning to the little guy to not do that again, ever. Neal smiled at his friend; who he considered a brother.

"Just so you know," he said, hoping to head off the 'evil Fed' speech Mozzie had no doubt prepared, "when I die, all my spy stuff is given to you."

"Really?" Mozzie questioned in interest. "Anything in there which will confirm a couple of conspiracy theories I have going?"

Neal nodded and Mozzie rubbed his hands together in earnest. Although, he did warn Neal to not die anytime soon.

Neal treated his wounds at his apartment. It wasn't big enough for everyone to stay so, after much discussion, Chuck and his team went back to their hotel and Mozzie went to wherever Mozzie went.

"Beer?" Peter asked, pulling one out of the fridge.

"Peter, just because you know I'm a Fed, doesn't mean I suddenly prefer beer over wine." Peter pulled a bottle of wine out of his bag.

"How did they let you fly with those?"

"I bought them here, Neal." Peter put them on the kitchen counter. "Let's talk."

"About?"
"Why you felt the need to come here to DC."

Neal sighed. He thought he had gotten out of any such talk when Peter hadn't brought it up in the first five minutes.

"Kramer made a deal with the CIA. He lets me off anklet to do missions and I solve cases for his team during my downtime. It's nothing special."

Peter took a swing of his beer, waiting to see if Neal would add anything to that.

"And you agreed, why?"

"It's good for my career," Neal responded. "In New York, I was pretty much frozen, useless for missions-"

"Neal. Since when do you care about your 'career'?” Peter asked with a raised eyebrow and a little anger in his voice. Surely he hadn't misjudged the young ex-con that much? "Because you care more about keeping people safe than you do about what higher ups think."

Neal smiled into his glass before pouring another half-glass of wine. "I really wish you weren't as good at your job as you are."

"Because I'm always right."

"Unless El is in the conversation."

"Unless El is in the conversation," Peter agreed. "Or the conversation involves art or forgery, in which case, you're the one who is usually right."

"Stick to your mortgage fraud and fake Prada handbags, I'll solve the big cases."

They laughed.

"Come back to New York," Peter said. "If you can't convince whoever you need to convince, then I'm sure Chuck can help you. After all, it's what his team was hired to do."

"I kind of wish Mozzie hadn't done that," Neal said quietly, lowering his gaze.

"Why don't you want to come back? Everyone's waiting for you. Your desk has been left untouched. Mostly untouched."

"Mostly?"

"Diana might have 'borrowed' your Socrates bust. It's sitting on her desk. She says she'll return it when you return." Neal was silent and Peter could hear the unspoken 'no' to returning. "At least tell me why."

And they were back to why. Neal knew that Peter wouldn't give up until he gave some kind of answer.
Chapter 10

Neal was silent. Peter had a feeling this line of questioning wouldn't get him an answer.

"Okay, talk me through it," Peter said. "Kramer found out this information about you, spoke to your bosses and, what?"

Neal sighed, took another sip of wine and talked Peter through it.

"Kramer appeared before I went to speak to the panel. He had a safety deposit box I had left at the bank under another name."

"Bryce Larkin?"

Actually, it was Danny Brooks but Neal wasn't about to make this seem more complicated than it was. So he skipped over that and said, "Kramer gave me the deal and I took it."

"What did he say to you, Neal?"

"That I went to Stanford. That I was recruited there and became part of the CIA. Kramer reminded me of something from the past. Back at Stanford, the CIA wanted to recruit Chuck as well. I framed him for cheating and got him kicked out so that they wouldn't."

Peter bit down his first reaction, which was to question what Neal was saying. He thought out it.

"If you were in the CIA, why wouldn't you want Chuck to be? And isn't he in the CIA now?"

"He joined later. Again, because of me. It's a long story and I'm not sure how much I can tell so I'm just going to focus on the main thing here; I didn't want Chuck in the CIA. You should be able to figure out why. The CIA is more secretive than the FBI. Missions are almost always matters of life and death. The criminals you face can be the worst people on Earth and, most of the time, you have to smile and nod right to their face. On rare occasions, you have to smile and nod and let them walk away because the CIA finds them useful. It doesn't help that therapy wasn't something we're offered; I do hope they've changed that."

"It's a tough job. Did you not think Chuck could handle it?"

"Peter, before I came along, you didn't leave the office until late some nights. Now imagine that, but all the time. You're on all the time and facing the worst the world has to offer. You die or burn out. I didn't want either for Chuck."
"You're really not making your case for staying here, Neal," Peter reminded him.

Neal smiled, a tight and thin smile. "You're on all the time, meaning anyone you interact with is drawn in as well. A CIA mission almost ruined Chuck's sister's wedding and she didn't know anything about the CIA at the time."

"If you're worried about the team-"

"Peter, I'm worried about you and El. Bryce Larkin has enemies. I make enemies-"

"Is this some misguided attempt to keep me safe?" Peter wanted to know.

Neal nodded. "You and El and everyone else. It's safer to keep away. When I said that CIA agents either burn out or die, I forgot to mention that I've done both. Numerous times."

Peter frowned at that. He poured Neal another wine as his glass was empty. Then he asked;

"What does Chuck think?"

Neal had to admit he didn't know. But Chuck was a bit of a optimist.

"Maybe we should find out," Peter suggested. "Also, I'm taking your couch tonight." He didn't fit so sleep was not as comfortable as it could be with his legs hanging over the edge and his shoulders squeezed into the space on the couch but having some answers helped it be restful.

Neal contemplated waking Peter up when he got up in the morning. He entertained the idea of pushing Peter off the couch or splashing water on him. He also entertained the idea of just leaving for work without letting Peter wake up. He had already called Kramer to let him know that he was back and needed a new anklet. Kramer had mentioned that he was glad he was okay and they would take care of it the moment he was in the office.

The smell of Neal's coffee roused Peter from his sleep. Neal made another cup and placed it in front of him.

"It's not June's Italian Roast but it's better than the stuff they serve at the office."

Peter took it and enjoyed it, rolling his shoulders periodically to work the stiffness and soreness out.

"Does the CIA have nice coffee?" Peter asked.

Neal smiled. "Government coffee is the same in most government offices. If the CIA gives you nice coffee, they want something from you."

"Huh. In the FBI, it's something to bond over."

"I noticed." Neal gave a soft smile, more suited to Bryce as he continued his morning routine.

"I'm coming to the office with you," Peter said, getting up as Neal got ready to leave. He had quickly pulled on his office clothes when Neal had gone to shower.

Neal wondered if Kramer would chase Peter off.

No such luck. Kramer almost seemed to welcome Peter right before pulling Neal aside. The new anklet was strapped on and activated. Peter frowned throughout the whole process.
"Thank you for your assistance, Peter. Now you can get back to your holiday before I file a complaint with the New York office. Go enjoy yourself. Visit the White House. Get a pizza."

"The pizza is supposed to be good," Neal commented.

That comment suggested that Neal hadn't had a chance to try the pizza. Peter felt that should be addressed but his phone buzzed with a message from Chuck. He let Neal get to work while he answered it.

Within the hour, Chuck waltzed into the office with a briefcase in his hand and a very professional suit on.

Neal came over and looked Chuck up and down. "You've got to be kidding," he muttered so that only Chuck and Peter could hear.

"What? What's wrong?" Chuck questioned, moving around to check his outfit.

"Where did you even get a suit that's worth over a thousand dollars?"

"You know that just by looking?"

Peter wasn't surprised. This was Neal after all.

"Of course I know by looking. Where did you get the suit, Chuck?"

"Moz."

Neal muttered a little curse at Mozzie under his breath.

"You haven't asked what I'm doing here," Chuck said. Neal glared but asked anyway. "I'm here to get Kramer to agree to send you back to New York with Peter."

"What. Chuck, no. You can't just do that!"

"Why not? I think I get the job done. Besides, Peter would be happy to have you back. Don't you want to go back to New York?"

"Of course not." Neal grabbed Chuck's arm and pulled him down a nearby corridor. "Chuck, I'm a spy. Everyone around me is in danger. I'm not taking that to New York."

"You had no problems with it before Peter found out. Now that he knows, he can provide better back up and maybe I'll even get Morgan to send him a fruit basket. Or he can get together with Awesome and they can swap stories of terror or something."

"You told Morgan? And Awesome?" Neal wanted to bang his head against the wall. Morgan was a gullible idiot and Awesome was such a dude-bro that Neal expected him to walk around with a surfboard.

"They found out. Morgan adapted quite well," Chuck explained. "You're making a big deal out of this when it doesn't have to be. We can help."

"You live in California. How are you supposed to help?"

"The Internet?" Chuck smiled and placed a hand on Bryce's shoulder. "Now, putting spy stuff and everyone in danger aside, don't you want to go back to New York? Where you have your awesome apartment and landlady in a building which could pass for something out of a spy novel with secret
compartments and passages. Where you have co-workers who notice when you're gone and help you when you need it. And is basically the place you retreated to after everything with the Intersect?"

Neal's blue eyes didn't move from Chuck's face. However, he didn't say anything, which said that the answer was 'yes'. Neal completely dodged answering the question, asking Chuck where he had heard about the secret compartments and passages.

The answer was Mozzie, again. Neal expressed as much.

"Look, if you don't want me to try, tell me that working with Peter doesn't mean anything to you. That you don't trust him to watch your back."

"Chuck." Neal was serious for a moment before he couldn't help laughing. When he had sent the Intersect to Chuck, he had practically set himself up for this. "You've gotten really good at this."

Chuck scratched at his head. He had no idea what Neal was talking about. But, Neal agreed to let him talk to Kramer so he considered his goal achieved.

Two days later, Neal was sandwiched between Mozzie and Peter on a plane heading to New York.
The two groups split at the airport. One got on a flight with a final destination in California. The other got on a flight to New York.

Chuck made Neal promise to keep in touch. They both knew it wasn't Neal's strong suit but he promised to message Chuck at least once a month with a story from the office. Even if all Neal sent was a story about how much he hated mortgage fraud. Mozzie would make sure he did it since Chuck promised to send him cheap tech from the Buy More in return.

Neal fidgeted nervously before heading into June's. The wise woman had tea all ready to go in her sitting room.

She greeted Neal with a simple, "welcome back. Your apartment is as you left it. Now, come sit and tell me about DC."

Neal couldn't help smiling and obliging.

Peter's leave lasted until the next Monday, so Neal had a couple of days to get settled in before he would return to the office. Peter grabbed him the day after they returned and took him to lunch with El. He spent the afternoon and evening with the Burkes, even getting treated to dinner.

"I've missed your cooking, El," Neal said happily. Even though it had only been around a week, there was just something warm and filling about El's food.

El smiled back. "I heard you had quite the adventure."

Neal eyed Peter.

"She's my wife. And Chuck said it was fine to tell her."

"It's not Chuck's secret to tell."

"It kind of is. Everything I've learnt says that Bryce Larkin was very tied up in the events of Chuck's life." Which made sense, considering he was only learning about Bryce Larkin from Chuck and the people around him.

"Chuck's adult life maybe. We didn't meet until college."

"I'm interested in hearing about your time in college," El said. She leaned closer. "If it was anything like mine, I imagine there's an interesting story or two there."

"You realise I got recruited by the CIA while in college, right?"

El wasn't deterred by that information. "So, your stories contain spy cases?"

"Missions. And some of them."

"What about stories about Chuck?"
"Only last until I got him expelled."

"El, honey, leave Neal be. He doesn't have to share about Bryce Larkin's life if he doesn't want to."

Neal stared at Peter. That was the opposite of how Peter normally approached Neal's past. Although they didn't talk about it, Neal knew Peter was very interested in how Neal grew up and became who he did.

Maybe he got all his answers with the reveal that Neal was CIA and had a double life going?

"Peter," El said in a warning tone. Sounds like she knew something Neal didn't.

Neal said, "please tell me you didn't arrange a background check into Bryce Larkin."

"No. Bryce Larkin would set off all kinds of flags in the system. Plus, a background check won't net me any information." Peter pulled a file out of his briefcase, which had been sitting by the door. "This file on the other hand…" He looked at Neal. Neal had the feeling Peter might be joking with him but he couldn't deny that the file was real. With a flip through it, he knew that the information contained within was true and accurate.

"Where did you get this?"

"Kramer. He thought it would be safer if 'I knew exactly what I was dealing with'." Peter noticed the frown on Neal's face and the way his eyes didn't leave the file. "I haven't actually looked at it."

Neal respected that. Peter was waiting for permission from him to go digging around in his past. He handed the file back to Peter.

"Go ahead. I don't mind. Kramer's read the whole thing anyway. I'd like to know where he got that information from though."

Peter agreed.

"Neal!" Diana sounded surprised that he had returned. Most agents looked up at her exclamation, having various reactions to seeing that he was back and then going back to their work.

Neal spread his arms. "I'm back. Apparently, you all really need my help."

"Don't get too cocky," Peter said, walking past. "Or everyone will know that you only lasted a couple of days with Kramer."

Diana snorted. "Really?"

"They were nice but not you guys," Neal said. "And I missed Byron's suits." He ran his hands down his jacket and tugged it into place. The fabric was smooth on his skin, no itchy or scratchy bits anywhere.

"I don't think June would mind if you had taken the suits with you," Jones pointed out from his desk. Neal stared at him. He was right but Neal hadn't wanted any reminders of New York in DC.

After all, he hadn't planned to return.

Neal heard Diana and Peter talking a little later in the day. She questioned Peter on what he had done to get Neal back. After all, it was easy to imagine Peter breaking some rules to get Neal to return. She was relieved when Peter explained that he had just gotten a good lawyer and hadn't done
anything questionable. Chuck may have but Peter remained blissfully ignorant of how the kind agent had managed to work out a plan for Neal.

Routine returned and Neal could almost let himself forget about Bryce for a while. Then a tall, sharp-faced woman with dark hair walked into the office. She looked around and grinned at Neal. Her smile reminded him of a cartoon shark going after its prey.

"Oh, now this is a surprise."

Neal's mouth stretched to smile at Gertrude Verbanski, even though he wanted to shoot her. "What do you want?" he asked.

"Now, now, just because we're both in security, you don't need to treat me like a rival," she said. "Although I am in private security; I work for myself and make lots of money."

"How nice for you," Neal responded flatly. "Why are you talking to an ex-conman and thief?"

"Right," Gertrude sighed theatrically. "There's a little matter I need to talk to your handler about."

Neal showed her up to Peter's office and invited himself in so that he could listen. It was probably the right thing to do since Gertrude cut right to the chase.

"I have a gun in my pocket and I do love using it."

"Why are you threatening me?" Peter asked, baffled.

"Simple. Before you left DC, Agent Kramer gave you a file. I would like that file back."

"Why?" Peter and Neal questioned in unison. After all, the only file Peter had received was the one on Bryce Larkin.

"I compiled that file for Agent Kramer. A lot of work went into it. I would like it back."

"That file is on me," Neal said. "Not to mention the trouble it's caused since Kramer used it to get me to move. I'm happier if Peter keeps it."

Gertrude shot him a glare but she smiled and shrugged. "You can't control all the information about yourself. I need some insurance for the future."

"You can't have it," Peter said.

"And what if I was to shoot you and just take it anyway?"

"First, we'll find out just which of us is the quicker draw. Second, my agents won't let you leave unharmed if you do shoot me. Third, I have left very specific instructions for what happens to that file if I die."

Gertrude thought about that for a moment. "Well, I guess it's in safe hands." She turned to Neal. "Are you okay with that?"

"I'd much rather Peter have it than you."

Gertrude clicked her tongue. "Your choice. I wouldn't trust anyone from the FBI-"

"You don't trust anyone."
Gertrude agreed. Then she left.

"Do you know why she was really here?" Neal asked.

"She probably was just here for that file," Peter said. "And maybe even as a test of both our characters. What do you know about her?"

Neal recounted everything he knew about Gertrude, which consisted of a lot of rumour. She was good at gathering information, especially if she had been the one to figure out his safety deposit box at the bank and tell Kramer.

"I can't believe Kramer was able to hire her," he mused, thinking it was no wonder they had lost to the other agent.

Peter nodded his agreement. "I think I'll put that file in a safety deposit box. Or burn it."

"Moz could put it somewhere even she wouldn't find it."

"Done." Peter passed the file to Neal. "It's good to have you back."

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