Harlequin's Shadow

by Silbrith

Summary

The day of reckoning has come for Vincent Adler as Neal and Peter embark upon an elaborate U-boat con to take down the crooked hedge fund manager. Fluff: Speakeasy party, Labor Day. Travel: France, Germany, Hungary, Albania, Cape May. Set within the Caffrey Conversation AU.
Notes: Harlequin's Shadow takes place after the events in Nocturne in Black and Gold and Dark Rabbit. The first chapter includes a short recap for new readers. I've also written a post on the status of the key players at the beginning of the story for our blog: Penna Nomen & Silbrith Conversation. The post is called "Prelude to Harlequin's Shadow." See the notes at the end of the chapter for more information.


"More cognac, sir?"

Peter shook his head and mouthed a no to the attractive flight attendant. He switched off the overhead light but kept his laptop powered on.

He knew he should follow Neal's example. His fellow passenger was already asleep, reclined in the luxurious padded-leather first class seat. But first class or not, Peter didn't fall asleep easily on board a plane. And while Neal might have had no difficulty with the five-star cuisine and fine wines of Air France, Peter would probably have been better off with meatloaf and a beer.

After the attendant picked up their dessert plates, Peter had retrieved his laptop from the overhead bin to review case files. Old habits, he realized. He still wasn't into character. Neal would probably deduct points. Ever since he appointed himself to be Peter's coach in how to play fast and loose with rules and regulations, Neal had been an exacting taskmaster.

According to the script they'd all—even Hughes—signed off on, Peter was supposed to be embracing his new image as a Bureau agent gone bad. He'd been corrupted by his reprobate consultant to abandon the strict code of ethics he'd previously adhered to. Peter now skirted guidelines as easily as Neal. The former rules governing what was permissible no longer applied. Flying first class to Paris by using Neal's cousin Henry's frequent flyer miles wasn't just sanctioned, it was encouraged.

Right.

With a sigh Peter admitted to himself this was still a work in progress. It was all Mozzie's fault.

The week had started out so well. The team members at White Collar were all on the same page. Over the past month they'd developed an elaborate multi-pronged con to trap not only the crooked hedge fund manager Vincent Adler but also Klaus and Rolf Mansfeld. The brothers had both faked their deaths and had only recently been discovered to still be alive. Together they ran the most formidable partnership of art criminals in the world, combining the skills of a master thief with an expert cybercriminal to confound law enforcement.

Peter had advocated for himself to be an active player in the op. He'd insisted that the days when Neal had to shoulder the entire responsibility of being a rogue agent were gone. In the past Neal needed to convince criminals that he'd agreed to work with the FBI as part of a long con. Now Peter was several shades grayer as well. The fact that Hughes also had a part to play helped to mitigate the awkwardness, but Peter's new persona had been much easier to discuss when the con was off in the future. The moment was now staring him in the eyeballs.
Thanks to Mozzie, he and Neal had boarded a plane this evening to fly to France. Their mission was to clear an innocent man's name. Not something that should fill Peter with unease. But when that person happened to be the world-class thief Gordon Taylor, Peter knew he was in for his initiation by fire.

"You still stewing?" Peter glanced over to see Neal looking at him with amusement. "Your worry lines are searing my eyelids."

Peter restrained his groan to a low rumble in his throat. "When I approved the con, this is not what I had in mind."

"Think of Gordon Taylor as another Mozzie. Yes, his definition of what's legal may not be the same as yours—restrain those growls—but he also has high ethical standards and he pays handsomely. You should consider this a spectacular opportunity. If we can help him, we'll earn his gratitude, and that's something we can place in the bank for a rainy day. We're investing in the future, Peter."

"Why do I have the feeling you're trying to sell me a castle in the air?"

Neal smiled. "You'll thank me when you see the size of the dividend he pays. Get some sleep. You need to be at your con artist best for Paris." He relaxed back into the cushions and closed his eyes.

Peter glanced at his watch. No chance of sleep for him. Only an hour to go.

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Neal awoke to his shoulder being shaken. "Are we there already?" he mumbled. It was the middle of the night. The plane was dark. Everyone except Mr. Can't-Sleep-in-a-Plane Burke was doing what sane passengers were supposed to do.

"You can't miss this," Peter said in a low voice. "It's a once in a lifetime experience." He reached past Neal and pulled up the window shade.

The sky was black with a few stars glinting like diamonds against the velvety background. Peter was an astronomy enthusiast. Did he intend to give Neal a lesson in stargazing? Neal considered closing his eyes once more, but if he did, Peter would be even more of a grouch in the morning. He blinked to focus. "What are we looking at?"

"The Perseids. They're the most spectacular meteor shower of the year and tonight they're at their peak."

"So this is why you agreed to travel today!" Once Neal had secured Peter's approval, he'd been astonished that Peter insisted on flying out the next day. Mystery solved.

He'd never heard of the Perseids but Peter soon told him more than he needed to know. The best part for Neal was that the meteors originated from the constellation Perseus. Peter had once said that the sword-wielding slayer of Medusa was Neal's constellation. As they watched the faint streaks zip across the sky, Neal took them as an auspicious omen for the con ahead. Their success was already being celebrated in the stars. How could it go wrong?

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The glow hadn't faded by the time they arrived at the Jeu de Paume on Ile-Saint-Louis. Neal discovered this hotel when he worked with Klaus and his ex-wife Chantal. It had been her favorite pied-à-terre in Paris. For this trip he'd selected a two-bedroom suite to give them privacy to conduct business. Mozzie's safe house was off limits to Peter, and it was conceivable Gordon Taylor or one
of his associates might visit them. A certain refinement was essential.

"D'accord, merci." Neal accepted the keys from the hotel receptionist and gave one to Peter. "They gave us their largest suite," he explained to his French-challenged partner in crime. "I bet you didn't think you'd be returning so soon. I'm sorry El couldn't make the trip with us."

"I intend to not be gone long enough for that to be a severe issue," Peter countered, still a little grumpy from the overnight flight.

Not Neal. He was floating on a Parisian gossamer cloud. He intended this experience to make up for the three-car pileup his last trip to France had been. In a few short days, he'd succeeded in being dumped by his girlfriend Fiona, making Mozzie furious at him, and going behind Peter's back to retrieve a Braque painting which he and Klaus had stolen a few years ago.

Now Peter was fully informed about the Braque. They were about to sell a forgery Neal had made of it as part of the con to catch Vincent Adler, Neal's former boss. Adler was convinced that the painting was the key to finding a hoard of art looted by the Nazis. He'd been putting out feelers since February that he was prepared to pay a king's ransom for *Violin and Candlestick*. Neal intended to make his dream come true.

The manager of the Jeu de Paume, Yves Thierry, was a friend. Neal had often played piano in the lounge during the time he was a member of Klaus's crew, and he'd maintained the tradition ever since. In return Yves gave him a hefty discount off the hotel bill. It was all a matter of scratching each other's back—an exchange of favors. In Neal's former world, favors were often a more reliable currency than cash or any other form of treasure.

It was a lesson Peter still had trouble accepting. Neal hoped this trip would make his rookie more comfortable.

The suite Yves had provided them was the same one Neal had stayed in with Klaus and Chantal. Peter reacted warily to the news. He still worried about lingering ghosts from the psychological mind games Klaus and Rolf had played on Neal last month. But Neal assured him the choice of suite had the opposite effect. It helped him slip back into the mindset of the out-of-control thief he needed to portray for their upcoming con.

The third member of their crew had already arrived in Paris. Mozzie would join them in their suite after Peter had a few hours to catch up on sleep. Neal used the time to sketch. Their sitting area overlooked the central courtyard. He opened the French doors and positioned himself where he could gaze down on the patio below. The window boxes were bright with red and white geraniums in the morning sunshine. He planned to make a drawing of the scene for El.

When Peter emerged from his bedroom, Neal was glad to see that he was wearing the maroon silk shirt which Neal and El had purchased during their shopping spree.

The news about Gordon Taylor's arrest had broken on Tuesday, and it had taken a full twenty-four hours to convince Peter they should take advantage of the opportunity. While waiting for permission, Neal had gone into contingency-planning mode. During the lunch hour on Wednesday he'd sneaked off to meet El at the Burke townhouse. Together they'd inspected Peter's wardrobe. The results were about as dismal as he'd feared. El had warned him in advance there would only be few items Neal would find acceptable, and she was right.

When Peter secured Hughes's okay to proceed, Neal called El with the green light for Operation Metamorphosis. In two hours of frantic shopping they'd achieved a new wardrobe without breaking the bank. As part of the Adler con, Neal was supposed to act like he was flaunting procedures and
thumbing his nose at the work routine. Taking off midafternoon to shop surely qualified.

And now Peter was dressed appropriately for his new role. Even Mozzie eyed him with approval when he joined them an hour later. "Good color on you, Suit."

"As leader of this crew, I expect you to call me something else. Peter will do," he added hastily, realizing he really didn't want to give Mozzie an opportunity to come up with another term.

Peter's mood turned threatening when Mozzie headed for the mini-bar, but Neal cautioned him with a head shake. "New rules, remember."

Peter reduced his growl to clearing his throat. "What's Taylor's status?"

"He's still under arrest. He was transferred to prison yesterday."

The case against Gordon Taylor was at first glance rock solid. He'd been charged with the theft of one of the treasures of the Louvre—The *Madonna of Chancellor Rolin* by Jan van Eyck. A guard had been killed during the commission of the crime. Gordon's image had been captured on security cameras and his fingerprints were found on the support mounting for the wood panel. Gordon denied any knowledge of the crime. To Neal the evidence reeked of a frame but convincing the French of that could be difficult.

Peter pulled his chair closer to Mozzie. "You're the expert on Gordon. You've worked with him on jobs for years. The Interpol files describe cases where they believe he may have played a role. What I want to hear from you is what the man is like."

Mozzie, primed with a glass of Courvoisier cognac, considered for a few moments before speaking. Neal gave Peter points for knowing how to handle his iconoclast friend. Mozzie responded best to being consulted as one might an oracle. And while the Oracle of Gotham might not impart his wisdom to the Bureau, he was receptive to the supplication from the leader of his crew.

"Gordon is the thief we all admire and wish to emulate. He never hurts anyone. He pays his crew members exceptionally generously and treats them as his extended family. Because of that closeness, he's very particular about who makes the cut. Once you're in Gordon's inner circle, you know you can count on him if you fall into a rough patch."

"How familiar are you with the rest of his crew?"

"I don't know many of them," he admitted. "Gordon has people on call throughout the world."

"Do you suspect he was framed by someone from his inner circle?" Neal asked Peter.

"It's always a possibility, but based on Mozzie's assessment, it does sound unlikely."

"It's difficult to conceive he's been betrayed by someone from within," Mozzie confirmed. "Gordon abhors violence and has no tolerance for anyone who displays shall we say a lower code of conduct. You might not call him a Robin Hood but others have. He's acquired a fortune through wise investments and is highly selective of the jobs he undertakes."

"Can you share any specifics about which types of jobs are most attractive?" Peter asked.

Neal gave him a warning shake of his head as Mozzie's lips clamped shut. Peter's question was too incriminating to be answered.

Peter eyed the two of them for a moment then reached into his pocket. Pulling out his wallet, he
retrieved his badge and placed it face down on the cocktail table. "None of what you divulge will be used against Gordon. You know me. I'm willing to stack my integrity up against Gordon's. If either one of you feels otherwise, we need to have a talk."

Neal wouldn't have been able to provide many details since he'd never worked for Gordon and Peter knew that. But by including him in the mix, Mozzie wouldn't feel singled out. Peter just earned himself bonus points.

Mozzie pursed his lips as he swirled the glass of cognac. "Gordon is intrigued by high-value merchandise—an obvious observation, but he does set a high bar before he'll consider any job. Because of his investments and real estate holdings, he can afford to. He demands from any prospective client that they be willing to put skin into the game, usually in the form of a substantial down payment. Jewels and antiques can be quite lucrative. Gordon to my knowledge has never stolen from a museum. He prefers targeting individuals and corporations. He's particularly fond of stealing merchandise from crime lords."

Neal listened fascinated. Mozzie was revealing facets to his operation Neal didn't know about either.

"He's cautious and meticulous in any undertaking," Mozzie continued. "That's one of many reasons he values my expertise so highly."

"To your knowledge has he ever worked for the Mansfields or Ydrus?" Peter asked.

Mozzie considered briefly then shook his head. "He's never mentioned them to me. I concede that Ydrus could have been a client, but I feel quite comfortable in asserting that Gordon never considered himself to be an employee of theirs. He values his independence and freedom far too highly to work for a syndicate."

"We're all in agreement that it's unlikely Gordon would have committed such obvious blunders," Peter said. "Does he have any enemies that you know of?"

Mozzie shrugged. "Only law enforcement. He is beloved throughout our community."

Peter grunted. "Plainly someone doesn't like him. Who's your source for what's going on?"

"André Renard called me Tuesday morning, seeking counsel."

André and Neal had been friends for a long time. They'd both worked for Keller when Neal fled to Europe, and their friendship had been strengthened through a love of competitive fencing. Neal had rescued André from a nasty confrontation with Keller in Geneva. Last fall in New York, André had returned the favor by helping Neal con Garrett Fowler. Afterward, Mozzie had paved the way for André to join Gordon's crew. The exchange of favors had led to this moment when Neal and Peter were in a position to scratch Gordon Taylor's back. Peter didn't yet fully realize how significant the opportunity was.

"The main issue that I foresee is lack of trust," Neal said. "Gordon's only met me once. He knows me by reputation, but that's not necessarily a help in these circumstances."

"Peter faces a much more daunting hurdle," Mozzie warned. "I've done my best to pave the way with André, but Gordon's distrust of anyone connected with law enforcement may surpass my own."

"It's that bad?" Peter mocked.

Mozzie nodded, heaving a sigh as if to highlight the difficulty of the task. "I've become tolerant of the suits on your team. Think of Gordon as what I was like when we first talked, and you'll have a
"That's what makes this such a fantastic opportunity," Neal said hurriedly, injecting an extra dash of enthusiasm to his voice before Peter squelched any attempt to work with Gordon. "If we can prove his innocence, you will have secured his trust. Gordon could play a key role for taking on Ydrus."

He was relieved to see Peter nod reluctant agreement. "Plus, we're counting on André's assistance to fence the Braque forgery you made. That's the primary reason I decided to go along. But it's a big gamble."

Peter seemed obsessed these days in making Neal confront reality. It wasn't that Neal ignored the less favorable outcomes, but he'd always been a glass-is-half-full kind of guy. Still, Neal composed his features into a thoughtful, attentive expression guaranteed to please.

"If we discover Gordon's guilty, we'll be forced to back out and turn over any additional evidence to the police," Peter the pessimist pointed out. "That outcome could prove more damaging than if we hadn't made an overture. And what happens if we can't prove Gordon's innocence? André and Gordon will have an even lower opinion of us."

Mozzie scanned the room and frowned. "It's really a shame there are no board games here. If I only had Candy Land, you'd be able to appreciate the beauty of our concept. By helping Gordon combat Lord Licorice in Molasses Swamp, he will provide us the shortcut we need through the Gumdrop Mountains." He eyed Neal's sketchpad speculatively. "We must make do with the tools available. We have an hour before you need to leave for your meeting. Ample time for Neal to draw an approximation based on my expert knowledge."

Neal broke into a grin. "You want me to draw you a map of Candy Land?"

"Didn't I just say that? Start with the Peppermint Forest on the lower right."

Peter felt on much more solid ground when he and Neal headed to the headquarters of the National Police for a meeting with Marcel Jauffret. Even though Mozzie warned them their destination was the equivalent of the Crooked Peanut Brittle House, Peter was willing to take his chances.

Marcel Jauffret was a colleague on the Interpol art crimes task force. The close working relationship they'd developed earlier in the year was a godsend when Neal was abducted by the Mansfelds in July. The brothers intended to frame Neal for the theft of *The Astronomer*, a painting by the Dutch Renaissance master Vermeer. They'd placed Neal inside a virtual world with the goal of implanting a set of fake memories which would be triggered by the discovery of the theft.

Their plan almost worked.

Neal had been abducted in San Diego, but he'd been rescued before the procedure had been completed. The Mansfelds didn't know that Neal was aware of the lies they'd crammed inside his head. Once White Collar knew what was intended, they'd been able to prepare suitable countermeasures.

French officials discovered that the Vermeer painting had been stolen from an off-site storage facility, and Marcel had secured approval for the theft to not be publicized. The French were giving them a grace period of three months, after which the painting was due to be exhibited in a retrospective on Vermeer's works. At that point the theft could no longer remain a secret.

The White Collar team hoped to take advantage of the window to recover the painting as well as
bring the Mansfelds to justice. Neal had prepared a forgery of *The Astronomer* which could be used if any questions about the painting were raised.

Despite Peter's mixed feelings about helping Gordon Taylor, he welcomed the opportunity to confer with Marcel. He would be a key player in the operation. Marcel had been a detective for ten years. He'd played professional soccer for a couple of years before joining the force. The same flexibility he'd displayed on the field was carried over to his investigative work.

It was late afternoon by the time they met with Marcel in his office at police headquarters. The furnishings were even more spartan than the Bureau's. Peter felt ill at ease in his new clothes. Neal might be able to wear tight pants, but his chafed. Marcel's rumpled charcoal suit and light blue shirt looked far more comfortable.

"Do you have any additional evidence that a stockpile of Nazi-looted art actually exists?" Marcel asked skeptically. Peter wasn't surprised at his attitude. Marcel had on several occasions referred to the number of leads the French had pursued which turned out to be dead ends or hoaxes.

"We're confident that the major players believe there's a lost hoard waiting to be discovered," Peter said, choosing his words carefully. "Karl Huber has in his possession the shipping manifest. He likely shared the information with Ydrus." Huber was the son of a Nazi officer stationed in Paris. The team believed the partial list had been acquired by the father. On it were the names of several paintings known to be missing since the war.

"But there's no indication where the paintings were shipped," Marcel pointed out. "Huber also has the sheet of fractal equations which you suspect contains a Resistance code. I researched the mathematician Paul Lévy who you believe invented the code and could find nothing about it. I don't suppose you could name your source?"

The eyebrow he raised was directed not at Peter but at Neal. Marcel, like everyone else on the Interpol art crimes task force, was aware of Neal's past. They'd come to terms with the fact that Neal had reformed and they'd learned to appreciate his access to informants who would never consider doing business with official channels.

Neal shook his head regretfully. "Our source wishes to remain anonymous. Since they're cooperating and are actively helping us uncover further information about the code, I'm afraid we can't share any details. We hope to be able to later."

Neal was being diplomatic but by the way Marcel pursed his lips, it was clear he didn't expect that wish would ever be fulfilled. "We're still searching for Huber," Marcel continued, "but have uncovered no new information about him. We assume Ydrus is shielding him."

The international criminal organization Ydrus had only been in operation a few years, but had already become one of the top three major players for illegal arms traffic and art crimes. The fact that the Mansfelds appeared to be working with Ydrus was what gave Marcel the leverage to keep news of the Vermeer theft a closely guarded secret. If the con were fully successful, they'd bring down not only Huber and the Mansfelds but also the Ydrus leadership.

"And you continue to believe that Vincent Adler is unaware of the manifest?" Marcel asked. "You're sure he's not working with Huber?"

Peter nodded. "Adler's father knew the senior Huber, but as far as we know Vincent Adler has not reached out to his son. All indications are that they're competing for the same prize. Adler's father believed that a U-boat filled with Nazi treasure had been sunk somewhere in the Atlantic. Several months ago, Vincent Adler, the son, uncovered information which indicates that a painting by
Georges Braque, *Violin and Candlestick*, contains the key to the sub's location."

"And you intend to fool both parties?" Marcel asked.

"Exactly," Neal said confidently, as if it were already a done deal.

"If we play it right," Peter elaborated, "not only will we capture them but we'll be able to identify the Ydrus informant working within the FBI. Rather than planting misleading information with the entire group, we can home in on the mole."

"Along the way we hope to discover the location of the actual treasure lode," Neal added.

Marcel whistled softly. "You've aimed high. You really think Gordon Taylor can help you?"

"If we can persuade him to cooperate," Peter said. "Based on our understanding of the theft, the crime he's been arrested for doesn't fit his profile."

"You suspect he's being framed and you could be right." Marcel drummed the fingers of his right hand on the desk. "I've been studying Taylor for years. He's never injured anyone, but the evidence against him is damning. A surveillance camera recorded his image a few minutes before the theft was committed. His fingerprints were found on the wall by the painting's location."

"But you haven't recovered the Van Eyck," Neal noted. "And someone could have been disguised to look like Gordon."

"I share your caution," Marcel said. "After all the disguises the Mansfelds have used, I'm also inclined to view a frame as likely. But you should know that my superiors are ecstatic about having finally captured the famous Gordon Taylor. They see this as a great opportunity to put him away for decades. The murder of the guard could keep that cell door locked for the rest of his life."

"Does he know that?" Neal asked.

Marcel reflected a moment and smiled. "You intend to employ bad cop good cop?"

Neal shrugged acknowledgement. "It's a classic."

Marcel twirled a silver ring on his finger. "I could reinforce it."

"Where's he being held?" Peter asked.

"La Santé."

Neal raised an eyebrow. "The VIP wing, I assume."

Marcel smiled. "Given his notoriety, it's appropriate. I'll make arrangements for you to see him this evening. Before then, I'll meet with him. Taylor must already appreciate the severity of his situation, but a reminder can't hurt."

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During the taxi ride to the prison, Neal enjoyed regaling Peter with stories about La Santé—not that he'd ever been incarcerated there, of course. He was still expounding on some of the more lurid cases while they waited in the interrogation room for Gordon to be brought in. "Did you know that the guillotine continued to be used at the prison until the 1970s?"

"And it was abolished in 1981 along with capital punishment," Peter riposted promptly. "I hope you
don't have designs on performing a Scarlet Pimpernel rescue?"

"I was born too late." Neal added just the right amount of theatrical overtone to his moan to let Peter know he was joking . . . mostly. Surely Peter understood he was simply embracing his new role. According to the guidelines, as advocated by no less an authority than Reese Hughes, Neal was supposed to play the part of an out-of-control cocky criminal who lived to thumb his nose at the authorities. "Just think, Peter, we could have worn cloaks, tricorne hats, carried sabres . . ."

Peter raised an eyebrow. "You're no longer content with playing D'Artagnan?"

That was the response Neal hoped for. When he and his friends Richard and Aidan called themselves the Three Musketeers last fall, Peter had been kept out of the loop. "But you didn't get to take part, and I know how much you regretted it. Now's your chance."

Peter didn't appear to particularly value the opportunity, but before he had time to make a rejoinder Gordon was ushered into the room. In France, prisoners were allowed to wear their own clothing, and Neal was glad Gordon was spared the humiliation of an orange jumpsuit. But the expensive sports clothes he had on made it difficult to believe he'd been incarcerated. Would Gordon be less likely to work with them?

Neal made the introductions, and Gordon was as gracious as if he were welcoming them into his home. "Gentlemen, I'm sorry I can offer you no refreshments. Unfortunately we'll have to wait for a later time."

Neal took the lead in the discussion, as they'd already agreed, but Peter wasn't reticent to join in. He displayed a confident and straightforward manner that augured well. As they talked, Neal watched Gordon's eyes. They were telling a different story from his words. To listen to him, Gordon wasn't concerned. He was sure his lawyers would be able to secure his release. But his eyes said, "Get me outta here! I've been trapped and I don't know how to get out." Neal knew that look of panic. He suspected his own eyes had broadcast something similar on occasion.

"Your friends tell me," Peter said, "that this type of crime is not something you'd commit."

"They're quite correct," Gordon said calmly, a slight smile on his lips. His eyes were more forthright. They blared: "You're bloody right."

Peter crossed his arms on the table and leaned forward. "So who framed you?"

"The police," Gordon said promptly. "For years, they've tried to arrest me. Evidently they've decided their only recourse is to fabricate evidence."

"There's one other option," Neal murmured. "Your rivals."

Gordon shot him a calculating glance. "Anyone in particular you'd care to suggest?"

Neal nodded, pausing a minute before he replied to let Gordon mull over whom he'd come up with. "Ydrus. We suspect it's on a campaign to become the dominant player by eliminating its competition. Your fame must be known to them. You likely have been targeted as an obstacle to their goal. It would be helpful to know if they tried to recruit you."

Neal sat back to assess his reaction. The room they were in was free of listening devices, but Gordon couldn't be sure they weren't wearing bugs. If he'd been approached by Ydrus, he likely wouldn't tell them. A flat denial would mean he considered Neal and Peter to be untrustworthy. In his eyes, they could be either treacherous or working with the police.
"As an entrepreneur, I'm often solicited for advice," Gordon said, keeping his voice even. "I have clients in many spheres who seek my assistance with their ventures."

Neal silently gave Mozzie strokes for his sales job. That was more of an admission than he'd hoped to acquire.

"Do you know of any other clients who may have been upset at your refusal to help them?" Peter asked.

Neal wasn't surprised at Gordon's denial. Organized crime—the mafia, yakuza, and other groups—rarely sought assistance and didn't engage in turf warfare unless provoked. As for the single players like Gordon who operated with small crews, they lived by a code of ethics in some ways similar to a medieval guild. Ydrus was upsetting the natural balance, and that provided Neal and Peter the opening they needed.

The next day he and Peter worked at police headquarters, reviewing surveillance feeds. Marcel had supplied them with the complete file on the case and allocated them a secure room to work in.

The museum's cameras had been knocked out of commission in the gallery where the Van Eyck was being exhibited. In a matter of a couple of minutes the painting was grabbed. The burglary had occurred when the museum was open. A simple grab and run. The Van Eyck was in a gallery which had been temporarily closed to visitors and no one witnessed the crime. An accomplice was most likely responsible for shooting the guard who was first on the scene. The gun was equipped with a silencer, and the murderer was able to melt into the crowd of visitors.

The Louvre had hundreds of surveillance cameras. Tackling a review of the footage would take days, but there was a way to narrow the search.

"What do you suggest?" Peter asked.

"Think like a thief," Neal said promptly. Peter had attended several of his workshops on art heists. It was time for the master class. "The Van Eyck painting is a small panel roughly two feet square. You grabbed the painting. How do you get it out of the museum?"

Peter considered the problem. "A toddler's stroller has interesting possibilities."

"Very good. I also like a wheelchair. The advantage there is you don't have to manage a child."

"That would make it a three-person crew—the passenger, the thief, and someone to disable the camera."

Neal nodded. "Whoever took the camera out of action most likely shot the guard while the thief escaped with the art hidden in the seat of the wheelchair."

While Peter searched through the feed for strollers and wheelchairs, Neal scanned through the faces recorded in the adjoining galleries to see if there was anyone he recognized. The odds were astronomical against it, but wasn't he supposed to lead a charmed life?

So midday when she popped into view, Neal's laugh wasn't one of surprise but satisfaction. *Leila Bedford, gotcha!* She hadn't changed much in the four years since he last saw her, but her choice of companion had. Back then, she wasn't pushing a frail-looking woman in a wheelchair.
"Who's Leila Bedford?" Mozzie demanded impatiently. "And why haven't I heard of her?"

When Neal called him with the news, Mozzie suggested they meet at a café not far from Police Headquarters for a late lunch. It was the same café where Neal had met with him a little over two months ago. That had been when they plotted the break-in at the church to retrieve the Braque. Now Peter was the leader of their crew. No wonder Neal was feeling optimistic. Peter was his good luck charm and this time he was fully on board.

The owner of the café was a friend of Gordon's. They had no worries about being overhead, and the low light suited Mozzie's style.

"You haven't worked much in London," Neal pointed out. "That's where I met her."

"She's listed as the owner of an antique silver shop in the London Silver Vaults," Peter said. "There's nothing in the Interpol database about her."

The waiter came by to take their orders. Neal was pleased to see Peter order the sole meunière based on his recommendation. He was also drinking wine with them. Even his French was improving.

"That's one of her occupations," Neal agreed after the waiter had left. "Another is cat burglar. I met her when I was in London with Klaus and Chantal."

"Is she another Raquel Laroque?" Peter asked, passing Mozzie her photo.

"An apt comparison," Neal admitted.

Mozzie's eyes widened. "You were lovers!"

Neal restrained himself to a low grumble. He wasn't about to open up about that part of his life, particularly with Peter hanging on every word. What he and Leila were to each other shouldn't be a factor. "Klaus introduced me to her."

"Did she work on his crew?" Peter asked.

"Not to my knowledge, but I haven't spoken with her since the summer of 2001."

"Did you ever know her to steal paintings?"

Neal nodded. "She was particularly fond of paintings with women. This Van Eyck with Chancellor Rolin worshiping the Virgin Mary would have appealed to her. Murder, though? I don't know of any violent acts she ever committed."

"She could have been recruited, and either Ydrus or the Mansfelds supplied the crew," Mozzie said, helping himself to a slice of baguette. "She may not have realized the scope of the plan."

"Don't whitewash her too soon," Peter cautioned. "In four years, she could have changed. If she stole the painting, she's probably already left Paris. Any ideas on how to locate her?"

"Hold off on alerting Interpol if you can," Mozzie advised. "Let me give it a shot. Gordon's network of supporters in Paris may provide a lead."

"I haven't mentioned Leila to Marcel yet," Peter said, "but I should."

"Give me till tomorrow morning," Mozzie pleaded.

When Peter agreed to the concession, Mozzie was even more expansive. Neal knew it was a difficult
challenge for Mozzie to accept that Peter was willing to bend the rules, but Peter was doing his part to ease the transition.

"I spoke with André this morning," Mozzie said. "He's been helping me locate former members of the French Resistance. As we agreed, André will begin spreading the word that the Braque is for sale." He raised his glass. "Gentlemen, to the Violin and Candlestick. May her strings lead us to the treasure."

Peter clinked glasses and turned to Neal. "To your forgery."

Neal took a sip of wine. "She'll soon be singing for Adler."

Notes: Thanks for reading! Neal may consider that he doesn't need to talk about his relationship with Leila, but Peter will have other ideas. That's coming in Chapter 2: Leila. I plan to post chapters weekly on Wednesday. There are 19 chapters to this story.

A few references to earlier works: Neal's previous trip to Paris was described in Echoes of a Violin. During that trip he met Gordon Taylor for the first time. The Three Musketeers con was in The Queen's Jewels. When Peter placed his badge face down on the table, he was giving a nod to the canon episode "Forging Bonds."

The VIP section at the Santé has housed a number of celebrities including Manuel Noriega and the Jackal. The cells are larger and have amenities normally unheard of, such as privacy doors for the toilets and hot plates.

Thanks to Mysteryfan17, a fellow stargazer, for the inspiration for the Perseid meteor shower. The timing was perfect. In 2005, the Perseids actually took place on the night of Neal and Peter's flight.

Harlequin's Shadow is part of the Caffrey Conversation AU, created by Penna Nomen, and I'm delighted that Penna has offered to act as beta editor. Penna created the character of Neal's cousin Henry and he plays an important role in the story. Henry is particularly grateful to have her on board. No one knows him better than Penna! If you'd like to see photos of the cast members and other visuals, visit the Harlequin's Shadow board at our Caffrey Conversation Pinterest site at www.pinterest.com/caffreycon where both Penna and I pin illustrations for our stories. I'll update the board with additional pins when I post a new chapter.

Penna and I share a blog, called Penna Nomen & Silbrith Conversation at www.pennasilbrithconversation.blogspot.com where we post about our stories and adventures in writing. This week Penna wrote about the writing retreat we took last week: "Writing Retreat 2018." It was the ideal way to recharge our creative writing batteries.

Background on the Caffrey Conversation AU for new readers: This series was created by Penna Nomen and begins with her story Caffrey Conversation. Our blog has a list and short summaries for all the stories in chronological order. The primary difference from canon in that Neal was never sent to prison and the characters are several years younger. The personalities of canon characters (Elizabeth, Mozzie, Diana, Jones, Hughes, June, and Sara) are the same.

Peter recruited Neal in 2003 when he was 24. In the fall of 2004 he entered Columbia University's graduate program in art as a part-time student. In the spring of 2005 Peter and Neal were appointed to the Interpol art crimes task force. The work on the task force is part time and places additional emphasis on art crimes for the White Collar team. In canon, Neal's only relatives to be
mentioned are his father and mother. In ours, his mother Meredith has a twin sister named Noelle who is a psychologist. Noelle married Peter's older brother Joe during the 2004 Christmas holidays. Henry Winslow is Noelle's son and nearly three years older than Neal. He works at a private investigation and security company named Winston-Winslow (usually referred to as Win-Win). Neal has one other cousin, Angela, who is the daughter of Noelle and Meredith's deceased brother. Working with the White Collar team are two non-canon characters: Travis Miller, a technical expert, and Tricia Wiese, a profiler. Neal's friends at Columbia include fellow grad students Richard and Aidan. A costume designer named Janet Dodson is Mozzie's girlfriend. Pins for the entire cast and locations are on our Caffrey Conversation Pinterest site.

Disclaimers: White Collar and its characters are not mine. Any references to real institutions, people, and locations are not necessarily true or accurate.
Leila


Peter hadn't pressed Neal for details about Leila Bedford during lunch. He attributed Neal's reluctance to answer Mozzie's questions about her as a signal that it was a sensitive topic. In Peter's experience, the only matters Neal didn't like to discuss with Mozzie concerned his love life. Normally, Peter wouldn't pry, but in the case of a robbery suspect he had no choice.

He and Neal were scheduled to meet with Klaus's ex-wife Chantal later in the afternoon. Her bistro was on the Left Bank, south of Notre-Dame Cathedral and not far from the Seine. It was a picturesque stroll from their hotel to the bistro, and Peter planned to take full advantage of it to hold that talk. He'd discovered on their last trip how much Neal enjoyed walking along the river. Peter did as well.

That earlier visit was much on Peter's mind as they set out from their hotel. It still rankled that only a few months ago Neal was working with Mozzie in secret to retrieve the Braque. But Neal had made a course correction, promising to be more open. So far he was abiding to his word. Peter hoped Leila wouldn't provoke an about-face.

After they crossed the bridge which connected Ile-Saint-Louis with the Left Bank, they stopped by the railing to watch a pleasure boat cruising along the river. "You've been quiet," Neal commented. "Are you thinking about the last time we walked along the Seine to visit Chantal?"

"Um-hum. And the secrets you were keeping."

He winced. "I figured. Perhaps I shouldn't have told you that Mozzie and I ate at that same café."

"No, I'm glad you did."

"Have I mentioned recently how much more I'm enjoying this trip?"

"Relax. Several times over."

"I can remember walking along here that last evening, trying to justify what I was doing as the means to keep you clean." Neal turned to smile at him. "If I'd only known how much you were pining to join the crew, it would have made my life so much simpler."

"Okay, have your fun." Secretly he was pleased Neal was able to joke about it. It would make the upcoming questions easier to accept. "There's an empty bench up ahead. We still have a half-hour. That should give us plenty of time."

Neal looked at him warily. "For what?"

"Oh, nothing much. But since we no longer have secrets, I know you'll want to give me the uncensored version of what happened with Leila."

Neal groaned but joined him on the bench. "I thought you said my private life wasn't part of the deal."

"That's right," Peter said calmly. "And I haven't asked if you're seeing anyone." He didn't need to. He was confident he already knew who it was. A couple of weeks ago, Neal had mentioned he was considering asking someone out. Peter suspected that he was referring to Bianka Kaldy, the
Hungarian artist who had the studio next to his at Columbia. Peter had met her and knew they'd gone
to a few concerts together. "Leila is different. You know that. She's related to our work and I need
details."

Neal snorted a grin. "So you want the dirt on me and Leila?"

"Yep. I'll even help. You said you met her in the summer of 2001. That was when Klaus and
Chantal were giving you an introduction to London."

"You're doing so well, why don't you continue?"

"All right. Last May, Azathoth—we don't know if it was Rolf or Klaus—stole a Hilliard miniature,
Young Man Among Roses. You explained that Klaus liked to tease you about your resemblance to
the courtier in the miniature because you were always wearing your heart on your sleeve. Did Leila
snatch that heart?"

"Not for long." Neal continued to watch the traffic on the Seine. Did he think that would suffice?

"Were you intimate?" Peter asked, keeping his voice low.

Neal made a low grumble in his throat. "Just so you know . . . I don't normally talk about what
happened during a date, ever."

"And you know I wouldn't ask if I didn't have to."

"Yeah, I realize that, and you're right. It's germane to the investigation." He exhaled and was silent a
moment. "Leila is eight years older than me. Klaus introduced us the day after we arrived, and she
invited me out. Our relationship developed quickly. I don't believe I was ever in love with her, but
she's beautiful and sophisticated. I was flattered and okay, a little infatuated. We met daily. She was
supposedly introducing me to the London art scene, but that was only a sidelight. After a couple of
weeks, Chantal took me aside. Klaus had just told her that he'd made arrangements with Leila in
advance. He'd requested she . . . become intimate with me."

"Ouch. That must have hurt." For a moment Neal looked like that wounded kid he must have been
in London.

"It didn't do great things for my ego," Neal admitted. "I confronted Klaus, pretending that Leila had
revealed the truth. He argued it was for my own good. I lacked polish, and Leila was more than
happy to be my instructor. He used the occasion to lecture me once more about letting my emotions
control my actions. I very nearly quit on the spot, but Klaus promised not to attempt it again. And I
have to admit he made some compelling reasons for why the experience had been a valuable one."

"Even back then, Klaus was manipulating you."

He shrugged acknowledgement. "He was right to point out the vulnerability."

"Learning the truth about Kate must have seemed like déjà vu."

"Twice burned. I vowed not to let it happen again. Recognition is the first step toward the cure,
right?"

"Absolutely."

"Diana complains that I'm overly sensitive to the romance angle swirling around my character in her
Arkham Files stories. She may be right. My track record is probably the cause."
"Thank you for telling me. Klaus and Rolf have been manipulating both of us for months, and we need to be alert to another attempt. We assume Klaus shared everything he discovered about you with his brother. It's likely Rolf would be tempted to try a similar tactic."

Neal grimaced. "Enlist a woman as a means to get to me? It's certainly possible. But it won't work. I'm being careful, and that brings up the question of how much to tell Chantal. She doesn't know her ex is alive. I wish we could let her know."

That information was a closely guarded secret. Peter didn't have to remind Neal they'd need to keep her in the dark. Neal was gazing at the river but his thoughts seemed elsewhere.

"What's bothering you?" Peter asked, taking the bull by the horns. "Is it Leila?"

He shook his head absently. "It doesn't feel right . . ." Neal turned to look at him. "Your mention of Klaus manipulating me brought it to the surface. Why would he try to ruin Gordon?"

"You said it yourself. Eliminate your rivals."

"I know, but so quickly? He's been working on us for months, patiently waiting for the right moment. Gordon claims he was approached for the first time a few weeks ago. The action that's being taken against him doesn't fit with the way Rolf and Klaus like to toy with someone while playing their psychological games."

"You're right, it doesn't," Peter said thoughtfully. "This doesn't seem much like the technique a leopard would use. How about a snake?" he suggested, referring to the head of Ydrus who designated herself with the code word Python.

Neal looked at him curiously. "You think this could be an Ydrus-managed operation rather than something initiated by the Mansfelds?"

"They don't run Ydrus. Python does. Her operating style could be quite different from theirs. Klaus may have supplied her with the contact information but wasn't involved in the frame."

"If that's what happened, there's a chance Klaus would be furious with her. Making an enemy of Gordon is a dangerous mistake."

Peter agreed. The strategy of the last Arkham Files story had been to drive a wedge between the Mansfelds and Ydrus. Had Python given them an unexpected boost? The U-boat con they were embarking on was only the first salvo in what would be a protracted battle to bring Ydrus and the Mansfelds to justice. For the moment this chink in their armor couldn't be exploited, but it had rich potential.

Chantal had recommended they arrive at her bistro, Le Chat Vert, at four o'clock when she had a break before patrons began to arrive. Peter had met her during his previous visit. This time Chantal welcomed him with the same effusive embrace she gave Neal. She walked them through the kitchen to her small office in the back. The sight of all those gleaming copper pots and the rich aromas wafting out of them made Peter glad they were coming back for dinner that evening.

Chantal's tiny office was filled with file cabinets and bookcases stuffed with cookbooks. She only had one chair but Neal brought in two kitchen stools for them.

"Neal told me you are familiar with the early history of the Braque painting," she said after Peter closed the door. "Have you discovered why it has become so sought after?"

That was a sensitive subject. Adler knew of its connection to the missing art, but presumably Huber
and Ydrus did not. Neal trusted Chantal but had advised Peter to keep the linkage a secret. His concern was that Klaus might try to pry the information out of her by forcible means. "We're trying to determine that now," Peter said. It wasn't a lie, simply a half-answer, such as the ones Neal excelled at.

"Do you know anything about the family who owned the painting?" Neal asked, diverting her attention to the objective of their visit. "I told Peter that Klaus and I stole it in the spring of 2001. We'd stopped off in Oberammergau on the way to Munich. All I remember is that the chalet was owned by a family Klaus knew. It was at night and we drove a fair distance into the countryside to its location. There were no lights on outside. I wouldn't be able to recognize the place."

"Klaus did not tell me much more than you," Chantal admitted. "When he was a child, his family owned a ski chalet in Oberammergau. Luisa—that's Klaus's mother—had been a close friend of the woman who lived there. I do not believe he ever mentioned her name, but she was a musician. Luisa had mentioned the Braque as being an exceptionally fine reproduction. She had a good eye for art. She and her husband now live in Frankfurt and are on the board of the Städel Museum."

"Klaus chose to break into the house of a family friend?" Peter hadn't thought his opinion of the man could sink much lower, but it just did.

She shrugged ruefully. "He viewed it more as a juvenile prank than a crime. Klaus believed the painting was a reproduction. It may have been a spur of the moment decision. Neal had never been to Bavaria and Klaus was showing him some of the sights on the way to Munich."

"Do you think you could ask Luisa for more information about the family?" Neal asked.

Chantal shot him a quick glance. "You want me to ask her about the chalet?" She didn't ask why. Peter wondered how much she suspected. Neal had discovered the painting was an original a month after the theft. He'd told Peter that Chantal was involved in his discussions with Klaus about it. "I assume you would prefer it handled so that it does not arouse her curiosity?"

Neal nodded. "That would be best."

"Klaus's birthday is on September 7. I could call her to offer my condolences. He died less than a year ago. This will be a somber occasion for the family. It would be natural to reminisce about happy moments from his childhood. I could mention how he had told me about the family and the high regard he had for them."

Peter wished they didn't have to wait so long, but there was a chance Klaus was monitoring his parents. In any case, they'd need to wrap up the U-boat con before beginning any search for the art.

"Last time we were here," Neal said, "I mentioned a criminal group called Ydrus."

"The Snake?" she asked, her face flashing recognition. "Yes, I remember."

"Have you heard any recent reports of them?"

She nodded. "I have heard from friends that it has been . . . um" —she formed a serpentine wave with her hand.

"Slithering?" Neal supplied with a smile.

Her face brightened. "Slithering like slippery, how appropriate! Yes, this snake has been slithering in Paris recently. Is that why you are here?"
"It may be stalking one of our friends," Neal confirmed. "Be careful, Chantal. This snake is poisonous."

"That is what I have heard as well. Its knowledge is impressive . . . and unsettling. Friends have warned me that the Snake has been asking about me." She hesitated a moment then turned to Peter. "You know I am retired but I have many contacts. Several have mentioned being approached by Ydrus. It is making a major recruitment effort. I believe the enticements are quite lucrative."

"How are your friends reacting?" Neal asked.

"They are wary. The promises it makes are perhaps just a little too good to be believed, non? But I believe some have signed on." Her brow furrowed. "Others feel that Ydrus has a touch of the Napoleon about it. Or should I say Catherine the Great?"

"Because the leader's a woman?" Peter asked.

"That's right, but no one seems to know her name. They all refer to her as Python." Although Chantal wasn't able to provide any additional details, simply her confirmation of the leader's pseudonym was welcome. Was the Snake, as Chantal called her, making an example of Taylor as a warning to others?

By the end of the evening, Neal had another reason to call Peter his lucky rabbit's foot. One of Gordon's associates provided Mozzie with contact information for Leila Bedford. She owned an apartment under an assumed name on the Right Bank in the Place des Vosges. The fence who'd supplied the details had met with her the previous day. The chances of her still being in town were excellent.

Neal's pulse quickened at the thought of seeing her again. He held no animosity toward her, but if she'd sold her services to Ydrus, she'd have to pay the piper. Leila had a record with the French police and Interpol similar to what Neal's had been. She'd been a person of interest on many cases, but authorities had never accumulated enough evidence to charge her with anything.

Marcel submitted a rush request to obtain a search warrant and by midday Neal was standing beside him and Peter in front of the door to her apartment. A police car with back-up personnel was parked outside, but Neal hoped they wouldn't be necessary. Leila was no dummy. If they could find evidence, she'd know it was time to cut her losses and strike a deal.

The Place des Vosges suited Leila. One of the oldest and most beautiful squares in Paris, it was lined with mansions from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In London she had a Georgian flat at Mecklenburg Square. For her to afford two such prestigious locations indicated her business was thriving. Evidence she had Ydrus as a partner?

Leila was in a state of elegant dishabille when she answered the knock on her door. She'd draped an Hermès silk robe carelessly over gray silk pants. Her long brunette hair was swept off her face and held in place with a large clip. She surveyed them with a look of innocent surprise until her eyes rested on Neal who'd deliberately positioned himself off to one side.

"Darling, why didn't you call?" She pulled him into an embrace, prolonging the kiss. "Are these your friends?" she murmured in his ear.

"Of course, chérie," he whispered before breaking away. Marcel appeared to enjoy the spectacle and gave him an amused look. Neal chose to ignore Peter's frown.
"Normally my friends call first—particularly when so early in the day—but Neal is welcome anytime." She kept her arm wrapped around his waist and reached up to stroke his hair.

Neal introduced Marcel and included his title.

"Did you get yourself into trouble, darling? Do you need a character reference?" She gave him one of those impudent little smiles that used to set his heart racing.

Turning to Peter, she appraised his appearance, taking note of his expensive shirt and the European cut to his pants. Neal detected a slight wariness in her expression. Marcel looked the part of a French detective in his off-the-rack attire, but Peter was an unknown.

When Peter introduced himself and took out his badge, her banter vanished. She removed her arm from around Neal and stepped back. "Do you have a badge as well?"

He pulled out his wallet. "I also work with the FBI."

"Pity." She invited them into her apartment with a languid wave of her hand and took her seat on a black leather sofa.

Neal surveyed the salon as Marcel launched into the reason for their visit. The furniture consisted of sleek contemporary pieces. They were set against an exuberant backdrop of Rococo wood panels painted in stark white. A grand piano was positioned in front of the French doors.

"How distressing for you!" Leila said in dulcet tones. "I'd heard about the theft, of course. To have a Van Eyck stolen is a tragedy. You must feel terribly embarrassed."

"The loss of the painting is a grave matter, but even more serious is the death of the guard," Marcel replied, cutting short her fake commiseration.

Leila had a simple explanation, as Neal expected, for being recorded that day at the museum. She'd escorted an elderly friend on an outing. "I'm afraid I can't help you. I didn't notice the commission of the foul attack on the guard. I must commend your thoroughness. Are you talking with everyone who was at the Louvre on the day in question?"

Neal stood up and walked over to the wall as if to admire the carving on the panels. It didn't escape his notice that Leila flicked him an uneasy glance. Had she forgotten the lessons she gave him? In her London flat, she'd coached him on the art of concealment. It does no good to acquire treasures if you can't protect them, darling. There she'd used the Georgian wood paneling to create a safe haven. Would she have done the same in Paris? He began to lightly tap the lower panels. Peter distracted her by grilling her for details of her visit and the art she'd seen.

On the fourth panel he hit pay dirt. Running his fingers lightly along the carved foliage, he found the button. One gentle tap and the panel swung open. "Oops."

Marcel stood up, keeping a casual look on his face. "Old wood panels can suffer from rot. I have some experience with restoration. Let's see how bad the damage is."

While he strode over to view the interior, Leila deflated before their eyes. She sagged into the cushions of the sofa, her eyes bright with moisture. "Darling, how could you?"

Neal went over to sit beside her. "How could you kill a man?"

"That wasn't me," she protested quickly.
Marcel's expression turned grim as he pulled the Van Eyck out of the cavity behind the panel. "The damage is much more extensive than I at first realized."

"At a minimum you'll be charged as an accomplice in the murder as well as for armed robbery," Peter added, his bad cop face firmly in place. He turned to Marcel. "Life imprisonment wouldn't you expect?"

"That's what we'll push for," Marcel replied, pulling out his phone to summon the police unit waiting outside. He glanced at Leila. "Unless Madame has something to offer?"

And Madame did. After Neal's discovery of the painting, Marcel conducted the negotiation. Faced with a possible murder charge, Leila made the sensible choice. In return for her cooperation, she was promised a plea bargain.

By the time Peter and Neal returned to their suite in the hotel, they were able to report a most satisfactory outcome to their fellow crew member. Instead of berating Mozzie for using the minibar, Peter helped himself to a beer and invited Mozzie to take whatever he wanted. He was starting to get the hang of his new life.

Marcel had conducted Leila's interrogation. She admitted to being approached by an agent of Ydrus. The amount of money they offered was too tempting to resist. She claimed to have had no advance knowledge of the murder and didn't know whose fingerprints she'd left behind. Her accomplices had been Ydrus operatives who were brought in from Bosnia for the job. They hacked the surveillance footage. Peter suspected Jacek Kolar, a programmer who worked for Rolf, had been responsible, but Leila claimed not to recognize his photo.

No one mentioned Klaus and she didn't bring him up. Since they couldn't ask her about the Mansfelds without revealing their knowledge of them being alive, that avenue was closed.

"The Van Eyck was concealed behind a wood panel?" Mozzie's face took on the glow of a seraphic cherub. "Since the painting was itself created on a wood panel, there's a certain je-ne-sais-quoi appropriateness." He gave a schoolboy snicker. "I never thought I'd be so happy to participate in the arrest of one of our compatriots. I may have to go on a long retreat after this con to cleanse my soul."

"Or you may be turning over a new leaf," Peter remarked. "This is the start of the new Mozzie, version 3.5. You've corrupted me to color outside the lines. We're having the reverse effect on you."

Mozzie stared at him, in obvious dismay at the notion.

Peter slapped him on the back. "Don't worry, I'm sure the effect is transitory."

"Leila provided the name of her Ydrus contact as well as the accomplices they provided," Neal said, grinning at the exchange. "She'll testify that Ydrus supplied her with Gordon's fingerprints."

"The best news from your perspective is undoubtedly that Gordon was released an hour ago," Peter added.

"My activities have also born fruit," Mozzie said. "André told me he'd learned of a woman who was active in the Resistance. He met with her last night. I gather from the way he talks about her that she is a fellow shadow-dweller."

Peter groaned silently. Mozzie's euphemism for a fellow criminal did not fill him with a warm glow. While Mozzie related her reluctance to meet with any law enforcement official, Peter tried to estimate
the odds of her providing any useful intel. Would she be looking for an opportunity to stick it to the despised police? How many colorful terms did she have for the gendarmerie? Peter wasn't looking forward to finding out. He consoled himself with the thought that even if she'd only been a teenager during the war, she still must be in her '80s now. Surely she'd retired from any illegal pursuits.

"Do you know if she's familiar with Bergmann or Huber?" Neal asked.

"André was trying to find that out. He asked us to join him at his fencing club this evening for drinks." He turned to Neal. "Last time you were at the club, Gordon dropped in. I wouldn't be surprised if he does so again. André has continued to give Gordon lessons in fencing, and there's a billiards room at the club.

Neal's face lit up. "Gordon asked to play a round of pool with me. Will this be my chance?"

A few months ago, Peter would have been uneasy about Neal acting so excited to deepen his friendship with someone like Gordon Taylor, but not now. When Peter had first met Neal in St. Louis, Neal had talked about the compromises that would be needed for them to work together successfully. Peter had grown to appreciate that there was a world of difference between Mozzie, André, and yes, even Gordon Taylor and the likes of Vincent Adler and Matthew Keller. In the world of shadows, ethics and personal relationships were every bit as vital as in Peter's world.

André's fencing club, Lafaugère, was on the Right Bank. When Neal introduced Peter to André Renard, Peter was relieved André didn't embrace him as he did Neal. He still felt uncomfortable with the effusiveness of Gallic greetings. A friendly slap on the back was acceptable among friends. But kissing a guy he'd never met before?

Neal tossed him a half-smile, apparently reading Peter's thoughts like an open book. Peter ignored his him to focus on a man Neal held in high regard, and he liked what he saw. Probably in his early sixties, André moved with the natural grace of an athlete. Neal had told him André's fellow crew members called him the Silver Fox and not just because of his hair color or that his last name meant fox in French. He was intelligent and resourceful with the calculating eye of a strategist.

Mozzie seemed to be quite familiar with the club. He led the way to the cocktail lounge, appropriated a table, and ordered a bottle of champagne for their group. Mozzie seemed an unlikely member of a fencing club, but Lafaugère was much more than just fencing. The building had areas for all the indoor sports as well as an Olympic-sized swimming pool. Cocktail lounge, private meeting rooms, reading room—Peter wondered if Mozzie used the place for his pied-à-terre in Paris, which begged the question how many safe houses Mozzie had in Paris.

Over drinks, André and Neal reminisced about their fencing days in Geneva. Neal deftly used fencing as an icebreaker. He encouraged André to talk about being his coach in Geneva and tossed in some anecdotes about fencing at Columbia. These were subjects Peter could relate to. Soon both Peter and André were teasing Neal about what it was like to mentor him.

Peter was touched that Neal was so anxious for him to like André. Neal had no cause for concern. Thoughts of André's skills as a fencer of stolen property were shoved aside for the evening.

André was quizzing Neal about the season's final match against Harvard when Peter heard approaching footsteps coming from behind him. Turning his head, he saw Gordon had entered the lounge.

"May I join the party?" he asked with a smile. Gordon was dressed casually in clothes which probably would have cost at least a month's salary. Peter now appreciated why Neal had taken such pains with his wardrobe. For his part, Neal had also brought along continental looks Peter hadn't
seen before. Only Mozzie remained true to his iconoclast style.

Neal stood up and pulled a chair over for Gordon. After toasting his freedom, Peter and Neal explained Ydrus's role in the frame.

Not surprisingly, Gordon was much more forthcoming about the inroads Ydrus had made into Paris than he'd been in prison. Although he added nothing to what Chantal had already described, his expression reminded Peter of Neal's when he talked about Keller. Ydrus was now on Gordon's radar and he couldn't wait to take the group down. That knowledge could prove useful. Neal had said the currency of the shadow world was favors. Peter was pleased that their bank account, as far as Gordon was concerned, was solid.

And their new associate wasn't finished making deposits. After a few minutes, he reached into his inside jacket pocket and pulled out four envelopes. Turning to Peter, he said, "One of the tenets I insist upon is that everyone gets paid, no matter what the outcome. On this occasion, it's particularly satisfying." He handed envelopes to the four of them.

Peter opened his envelope to find a personal check for 10,000 euros. That was over 11,000 dollars. His immediate reaction was to reject it. "This isn't necessary"—He felt Neal's eyes on him, telegraphing him the response—"but I'm very appreciative," he finished smoothly.

Gordon smiled acknowledgment. "We may have the opportunity to work together again. Do you play pool?"

"I'm a rank beginner," Peter admitted. "That's Neal's strength."

"And you promised me a game," Gordon said, turning to Neal. "I suggest we relocate to the billiard room."

Peter had already observed that in addition to the modern training rooms, the club possessed other venues which were more reminiscent of a London private club. The cocktail lounge was one. The billiards room another. Walnut paneling, plush leather chairs, a bar. If Peter belonged to a club like this, he'd take up pool as well.

Neal was a master with the cue stick, but he may have met his match with Gordon. The two of them appeared to take delight in seeing who could make the most difficult trick shot. Afterward Mozzie played a round with Gordon. Peter had never seen Mozzie shoot pool but wasn't surprised at his expertise. He'd have to keep waiting to find a skill Mozzie wasn't good at.

While the others played, Peter made use of the opportunity to become better acquainted with André. It didn't escape his notice that André had been sizing him up as well.

"I begin to appreciate why Neal values you so highly," André commented. "When he mentioned he worked at the FBI, I was astonished that he'd been able to make the adjustment. The constraints of a large government bureaucracy must have been a rude awakening."

"Neal's been good both for me and for the other members of the team," Peter said, choosing his words carefully. André worked for Gordon. Anything Peter said would be communicated to the boss. "We've grown to appreciate that a certain degree of flexibility can achieve even greater success. Neal's taught us to be more receptive to unconventional approaches."

"Something he thrives at. It's a useful talent in fencing as well. There is a popular saying—'The sword is like a bird. If you clutch it too tightly, you choke it . . . too lightly, and it flies away.' You and he have achieved the perfect balance. Not an easy task—I salute you."
After Gordon left, André invited them to have dinner with him at the club restaurant. Over steak au poivre, Mozzie broached the topic of the lost art. Peter had to admire his persistence. Mozzie was a terrier in his pursuit of information.

"I'm happy to report that I have good news," André said. "The contact I'd mentioned is my mother." He paused a moment to let that revelation sink in. Judging by the others' expressions, they were as surprised as Peter.

"She was eighteen when the war broke out and quite the firebrand," André explained. "My grandmother told me she'd been unmanageable as a child. The Resistance gave her a purpose. I knew she'd been involved, but she's never discussed what her activities were and up to today, she's refused to answer any of my inquiries on your behalf." André refilled their glasses with wine. "Maman has been quite concerned about Gordon."

Mozzie peered like an inquisitive squirrel over the rims of his glasses. "May we assume that she also loves the shadows?"

André nodded. "That's complicated matters. She has an understandable bias against anyone associated with the police and was suspicious of your intentions. I spoke with her this afternoon after the news came out. She's now agreed to meet with you."

"Does she know anything about Bergmann?" Neal asked eagerly.

"Yes, but I don't know the details yet either. She'd like to discuss it with me first. I'll travel there tonight and meet you at her house tomorrow. She lives in a village west of Paris." He turned to Neal. "You may have heard of it. Auvers-sur-Oise?"

"It's Auvers-sur-Oise, Peter! It's worth it." Neal's pleading face spoke more eloquently than words for why they would need to leave the hotel at six in the morning. The appointment with André's mother, Isabelle, wasn't till ten o'clock. Peter could have caught up on his sleep—he still felt out of phase with French time—then enjoy a leisurely breakfast on the hotel patio. But it's Auvers-sur-Oise! Neal's words returned to prod him every time he wavered.

When they returned to their hotel, Neal spent an hour pulling up paintings of the village for Peter to admire. If so many artists—Pissarro, Cezanne, Corot, Van Gogh, among others—have lived there, how could Peter not want to spend as much time as he could savoring its delights? And that it was also the home of Isabelle Renard had to be a cosmic signal. Neal even played the Starry Night card, knowing that was one of Peter's favorite paintings. And although Van Gogh hadn't painted it there, he'd painted many other works around the village. Neal knew the Perseid meteor shower had been an omen. He just hadn't realized it was for Auvers-sur-Oise.

In the ultimate gesture, Neal offered to help with the voluminous report that needed to be written about the Gordon Taylor case, carving out the lion's share for himself.

Neal didn't mention the sketchpad he'd brought along, but he didn't need to. Peter could have continued to tease him about the early departure time, but that's all it was. He'd be able to write the report and soak up the town's atmosphere while Neal sketched.

For once all the breaks were falling their way. They'd managed to establish Taylor's innocence in record time and simultaneously brought Marcel up to speed on the status of the operation against Ydrus and Adler.
Neal swore that Peter was his good luck charm, a role Peter was more than happy to play. Did that indicate André’s mother would be able to provide useful details about Bergmann? Up to now they had precious little concrete evidence that a hidden cache of art actually existed. The possibilities were enough to make Peter as excited as Neal.

Notes: In this chapter, I filled in a couple of the blanks in Neal's life during the years he lived in Europe. It's a period I like to call his lost years. It begins when Henry’s father blackmailed Neal to stay away from Henry in 2001 and ends in St. Louis when Peter recruited him. Neal's lost years are the subject of my blog post this week.

Last week Penna wrote about our writing retreat for our blog. A reader asked for details about the approach we use to give feedback, and Penna has written a post describing it: The Beta Reader Conversation. I'm very fortunate that Penna's professional work involves guiding others. Her experience in how to successfully provide feedback allowed us to create a process which has worked exceptionally well for us.

For trivia fans, the saying André quotes is from the 1952 movie Scaramouche and is spoken by the fencing instructor Doutreval of Dijon.

Blog: Penna Nomen & Silbrith Conversation: www.pennasilbrithconversation.blogspot.com
Chapter Visuals and Music: The Harlequin's Shadow board on the Caffrey Conversation Pinterest website: www.pinterest.com/caffreycon
New pins include Leila, her apartment, and Neal playing billiards.

The sun had barely risen when Mozzie rolled up to the hotel entrance in an ancient Citroen Dyane. A loaner from some shady associate, no doubt. Did Mozzie ever drive anything which didn't appear to be on the verge of collapse? From Peter's admittedly limited experience, the answer was a decisive no.

There was barely enough space for the three of them. Peter's knees were next to his chin. Neal's reassurance that it was only a 45-minute drive, and that by leaving so early they were beating the traffic were the only things that kept this grizzly bear from grumbling all the way to the village. That and the truly extraordinary breakfast Neal promised he'd procure for them once they arrived.

They made only one stop—a flower market—where Neal picked up a bouquet of roses and dahlias to present to Madame Renard.

Peter's mood improved when they arrived in the picturesque village. The old stone houses, framed with colorful painted shutters and flower beds, harked back to an earlier, more serene era. Neal directed Mozzie to park in front of a café which doubled as a bakery. By the time Peter sat down at an outside table with a freshly baked roll, cheese, and chocolate croissant in front of him and an omelet on the way, he had to admit the location was worth the trip.

This was his first time to sample the pleasures of the French countryside, and it made him wish more than ever that El could be there too. When he and Neal joined the Interpol art crimes task force, Peter had dreaded the overseas travel that would be required. Now he was excited about future opportunities. Leading a crew of con artists, working abroad—would the Peter of a couple of years ago even recognize him?

After breakfast, the three of them strolled through the village as Neal pointed out various landmarks. The church was particularly noteworthy.

"Does anyone else think the church is a little spooky?" Peter asked. "When Neal showed me Van Gogh's painting of it last night, I thought there was something sinister about it."

Mozzie paused and backed up a few steps, framing the church with his hands. "An astute observation. It could serve as an illustration for the church Diana wrote about in her first Arkham Files story. All it needs are a few demons peeping through the stained glass."

Until recently, Peter would have laughed at Mozzie's remark. Instead, he stole a glance at Neal to assess his reaction. He was smiling as if he didn't have a care—or curse—in the world. In a peaceful village with a bright morning sun overhead, it seemed unbelievable that there could actually be demonic forces at work.

Yet, Peter had been forced to accept it.

A week ago, Neal had been diagnosed as having been ensnared by an ancient Greek goddess. El called her a vampire of souls. According to ancient legends, she acted as a muse to artists and other creative types while draining away their life force. If there hadn't already been one documented case of an artist dying from the curse last spring, Peter wouldn't have accepted it as possible.

The artist in Connecticut had wasted away from an unknown disease. His art had been affected,
turning dark and moody while the quality skyrocketed. It was that case which had led to the
discovery of the goddess.

Neal and Mozzie had researched cases of artists who appeared to have also been Astrena’s victims.
They’d identified Goya, Shelley, Constable, and Titian. Neal had wondered about Van Gogh and
Mozart. Van Gogh was certainly tormented. Mozart's life was snuffed out far too soon.

So far Neal had experienced no physical deterioration. His doctor was Diana's partner Christie. She'd
helped Neal with some unusual injuries over the past year, but this situation was unprecedented. For
his part, Neal had promised to alert Peter if the situation had changed and in return Peter had agreed
to restrain his hovering. Mozzie could help by forgoing any mention of demons.

After their stroll, they stopped at a small park on the banks of the river Oise. Peter pulled out his
laptop to work on his report while Neal sketched the river. Mozzie sprawled on a bench and
stretched out his legs, all the while giving an extemporaneous lecture on Van Gogh. Peter tuned him
out while he typed . . .

"You're not dreaming of Van Gogh, are you?" At Mozzie's words, Peter refocused his attention.
Neal's brow furrowed and he didn't answer for a minute as he continued to sketch. "No, and I
thought we'd agreed not to bring up Astrena during the trip."

"You've been busy," Mozzie said, dismissing his protest. "You might have forgotten to mention it. I
heard from Luchino at the Vatican library in Rome." Mozzie's acquaintance had proved helpful in
the past. He'd discovered references to Astrena in several manuscripts in the Vatican collection.
"Luchino believes he may have found a source for that book of potions Chloe is seeking."

At that Neal looked up. Peter wasn't at all comfortable that they were being forced to rely on a friend
of Dean's to make a potion to cure Neal and Sam, but El had given him a new perspective. Potions,
meds—weren't they all about the same thing? Christie was keeping an open mind. When Neal told
her about Chloe's efforts, she compared Chloe to a researcher formulating a new drug based on a
recently discovered plant in the Amazon.

"I've rescheduled my flight," Mozzie continued, "and will stop off in Rome to see Luchino on the
way back." He turned to Peter. "Have I ever told you about the secret vault in the Vatican library?"
As Mozzie droned on, Neal returned to sketching, a half-smile on his face. If he was worried about
the curse, he didn't show it, and Peter vowed to live up to his part of the bargain by not bringing it
up.

It did make him wonder, though. Neal had spent most of his free time in Paris sketching and he was
doing the same here. Over the past month, he'd prepared two forgeries while also working on
paintings for his master's exhibition. Peter had never known him to paint so much. Sure, some of the
work had been mandated by the Bureau, but much of it hadn't. Neal had once admitted he used
painting to manage stress. Was that what he was doing now?

"Will you include the river in your exhibition?" Peter asked.

"I don't plan to, but you'll be happy to see I've included the bridge on the river in my sketch." Bridges
had become their code word for keeping the communications lines open. Neal equated
himself with rivers far too often for Peter's taste. Rivers that ran away and escaped to the ocean—
that's what Peter thought of.

"In fact, I'm considering making river my panic phrase for the con," Neal added, flexing his fingers.
"Do you approve?"
Peter smiled. Diana was working the telepathy angle in Arkham Files. Here in France, Neal and his psychic abilities were hitting a new standard.

"And bridge for my safe word," Neal added, chuckling at Peter's expression. "Yes, sometimes your messages come through loud and clear. What's your safe word?"

"I use azaleas with El. Let's keep it simple and make it the same."

"And your panic phrase?"

Peter thought a moment. "Vampires might be too obvious. How about hunters?"

"Referring to Dean and Sam?" Neal shrugged. "A little hard to work into a conversation."

"I'll manage."

Peter returned to writing his report, and Mozzie eventually wandered off to find a fresh audience. An elderly man was sitting on a bench near them. Mozzie struck up a conversation with him. Perhaps he thought the villager might know something about the Resistance. Peter was envious over his command of French. To his ears, Mozzie could have been a native speaker.

Anticipation was high when it was time to leave for their appointment. Up to now they'd only heard rumors of a lost shipment. Would Madame Renard dash their hopes or provide the confirmation they sought?

The directions André gave them led to a small stone house on one of the village's picturesque lanes. André greeted them at the door and introduced them to his mother. Of slender build, she held herself ramrod straight despite her eighty-plus years. She had a witty, intelligent air about her—an unspoken alert not to dare attempt any fast ones. Peter was relieved to hear her respond to him in English. She appeared delighted at the flowers Neal gave her and asked them to call her by her first name.

Peter was struck by the somber expression on André's face despite his welcoming smile. He'd stayed with his mother overnight. Peter suspected whatever news she'd shared with him had been difficult to hear.

Isabelle's small living room was sparsely furnished with an old upright piano, a couch in faded mustard-colored fabric, and one armchair. André brought in a couple of chairs from the dining room for their use. The armchair Isabelle appropriated for herself while André sat on the piano bench. There were several photos on her bookcase which Peter glanced at before sitting down. He lingered over a striking photo which he assumed was of Isabelle and must have been taken around the time of the war. It appeared to be a publicity photo. She looked like a movie star.

Isabelle nodded to Neal's sketchpad. "André mentioned you were an artist. May I see what you have done?"

Neal showed her the sketch he'd just made of the river and also several scenes he'd drawn in Paris. As he talked, he worked both Mozzie and Peter into the conversation. Peter gave Neal points for using the discussion to make Isabelle feel more at ease.

For his part, Peter focused on Neal's studies at Columbia and how proud he'd been of Neal's first year art exhibition, figuring that was a safe topic. Any Bureau-related work was off the table.

Mozzie jumped in with his own stories about Columbia. Peter had never heard the tale of how he'd introduced himself as Athos from The Three Musketeers to Neal's friends at Columbia, and he enjoyed it as much as Isabelle. That flowed into a discussion of Neal's fencing match against Harvard
in the fall. Neal had been unable to tell André about his fencing at the time since André knew him under the alias of Gary Rydell. Neal was making up for it now. Peter was able to add details about the video Travis had made of the match and how much Peter's parents had enjoyed seeing it.

Isabelle couldn't fail to appreciate the closeness Peter had with Neal and even Mozzie, the quirky uncle. Peter knew he had two strikes against him for working at the Bureau. Neal had been given a pass because of his former life. Peter hoped his present remarks fortified by Gordon Taylor's blessing would be enough to calm her wariness.

"And now you wish to discuss the war, non?" she said with a gleam in her eyes. "I am willing to offer you an exchange. I agree to hear you out if Neal will sketch me." She turned to Neal and cocked her head. "Do you accept my condition?"

"It will be my honor." Neal opened his portfolio to retrieve his pencils. Moving to the end of the couch, he flipped the pad to a fresh sheet of paper. "Would you like me to include André in the portrait?"

Her face lit up at his suggestion. "Please." Turning to Peter, she took a breath. "We will start now. First, tell me why you are interested in Anton Bergmann."

Peter explained that they believed he was in charge of shipping plundered art out of France during the war. "We know he had an officer serving under him named Franz Huber. His son Karl Huber works for Ydrus, the organization which attempted to frame Gordon Taylor. We have in our possession a partial shipping manifest of paintings that we believe Karl obtained from his father."

"May I see it?"

Peter nodded and opened up his briefcase. He pulled out a photo of the original document as well as a list of the paintings. Isabelle's eyes widened as she scanned the sheet, and no wonder. Some of the most famous works looted by the Nazis were included: Pissarro's *Rue de Village*, Picasso's *Naked Woman on the Beach*, Harlequin and Columbine by Degas, and works by Matisse and Renoir. The most valuable of all was Raphael's *Portrait of a Young Man."

"We believe the paintings are languishing somewhere, lost to the world," Mozzie added. "They cry out to be rescued. There are two scoundrels who are attempting to track them down. In addition to Karl Huber, a ruthless hedge fund crook named Vincent Adler is hot on their trail. He acquired information from his father who was also a Nazi. Wilhelm Adler and Franz Huber were childhood friends but we believe their sons are working independently."

"You said Karl Huber has the manifest. What evidence does this man Adler have?"

Peter hesitated. They were discussing all the evidence they had with the mother of a thief who so far had revealed nothing. The FBI agent in him was blaring out an alarm that this was wrong. On the other hand, André was fencing the Braque for them . . .

Neal lifted his head and gave Peter an almost imperceptible nod. There it was, that telepathy thing again. You can trust her. We have nothing to lose.

"Wilhelm Adler worked at a U-boat factory during the war," Peter said. "We discovered that Franz had told him about a shipment of valuable paintings which had been placed on a U-boat bound for Argentina. Franz asked Wilhelm if fractals were used for U-boat antennas."

"Neal discovered that Huber possesses a sheet of fractal equations which dates from the same period," Mozzie explained. "I've been told that the hero Paul Lévy devised a code based on fractals
for the Resistance. That sheet may contain vital information relating to the art's location. I've been attempting to decipher it."

"Adler unearthed a letter from Anton Bergmann," Peter continued. "The letter is written to his wife and indicates that Braque's painting *Violin and Candlestick* is the key to finding a stockpile of Nazi-plundered paintings. Neal painted the forgery to trap Adler."

Isabelle beckoned André to her and murmured something to him, giving Peter a suspicious glance. André talked rapidly to her in French, far too fast for Peter to get the gist. He suspected Isabelle still classified Peter with the police. If he left, would she talk to the others? It was an uncomfortable feeling to be the outsider. Peter was obtaining a better impression of what Neal faced when he joined the FBI. Here Peter was the one no one trusted.

"Very well," she said in English, apparently having made her decision. "André, we need refreshments." She turned to the group. "Would you prefer cider or wine?"

They chose cider and while André served them, Isabelle stood up to inspect Neal's progress. They spoke in French, and she appeared to be pleased.

The cider Isabelle served seemed like a complex, sparkling wine in comparison to the cider he was familiar with. It also packed quite a kick, reminding him to drink it warily. Peter wrote down the name to try to find it in New York for El.

Drink in hand, Isabelle resumed her seat. "Thank you for your patience. It has not been easy for me to agree to what you ask. Since the war, I have not discussed what went on with anyone except my husband. André only learned of it yesterday." He placed a hand on his mother's shoulder as she examined her gnarled fingers for a moment. Looking up she said, "It was my desire never to relive those years, but you have convinced me the time has come." She paused to take a breath and clenched her hands together in her lap. "I joined the Resistance shortly after Paris was invaded in 1940. I was eighteen at the time."

Peter glanced over at the photo on the bookcase, and she followed his eyes. A smile touched her face. "That is a publicity photo of me. I was a chanteuse at a nightclub, and quite a successful one. The club where I sang became popular with the Boche officers. It was there that I met Anton Bergmann. In 1941, I became his mistress and began living in his apartment."

Peter's heart quickened at the news. Isabelle's knowledge was bound to be much more extensive than he'd imagined. For the first time, he began to believe that they might actually have a chance of recovering the art.

"I did so to help Rose Valland who had been appointed to curate the art at the Jeu de Paume Museum. Although I was not able to stop any shipments of art, I could occasionally discover which ones were scheduled to leave and also pass along details of troop movements to the Resistance."

She in simple, matter-of-fact terms described her life as a double agent, living with a man she despised for four years.

"I read Rose Valland's book," Neal said. "She didn't mention you." He looked at her inquiringly.

"That was at my request. By then I had assumed a new identity. I had no wish to have my part discussed." She stopped to take a sip of cider, a shadow crossing her face. "Practically no one knew of my role in the Resistance. When Paris was liberated, Bergmann fled and I was branded a collaborator. I fled and went underground. That was a difficult period in my life."
"This is your chance," Mozzie said, "to exact your revenge on the Boche. Those paintings are still their prisoners. They need to be liberated as well."

"That is the argument André used, and that is why I am helping you." She peered at the manifest. "There is no date on this list, but I remember when the Raphael disappeared. It was in early April of 1942. Rose asked me to try to find out where it had been sent. Bergmann's birthday was on April 23. I had planned a party for the officers at the club where I sang. He surprised me by canceling at the last minute."

Peter was jotting down notes. Neal had told him it wasn't necessary since Mozzie had perfect recall, but Peter couldn't place Mozzie's brain into the file. For now all their records were being stored in a private server Travis was maintaining in his apartment.

"I pretended to have a fit when he canceled." She gave a mirthless chuckle. "I was a quite a good actress, and he was besotted with me. He eventually told me that a shipment of art had been stolen by the Resistance. He never told me the names of the paintings, but I suspected the Raphael was one of them. After the aborted party, I did not see much of Bergmann for a couple of weeks. Later he admitted he had canceled it because he was interrogating a prisoner. I found out through my contacts that the prisoner died under torture." She stopped for a moment and bowed her head. When she looked up, her eyes were wet with unshed tears. "The man who died was a friend of mine. His name was René. I never knew his last name. His code name was Scarbo."

"From Gaspard de la nuit?" Neal asked, looking at her with sympathy. Isabelle's account was affecting all of them. It was understandable why she'd refused to discuss it for so long. It was likely their inquiry was opening up old wounds which had never fully healed.

She nodded. "He was a young idealist. Just a boy, really. He liked to think he could torment the Boche like Scarbo, the elusive demon, terrorizing them in the night. Alas, that was not meant to be." André passed her a handkerchief for her to blot her eyes. The room was quiet. Only the soft tick of the clock on the mantelpiece broke the silence.

Isabelle sniffled and resumed, her face darkening. "I knew Franz Huber. He was particularly cruel, that one. He was Bergmann's attaché. He also lusted after me. I let him take his pleasure so I could find out what had happened. It was a time of great unrest at the museum. Rosenberg, the Boche in charge of the looting operation, was called back to Berlin. Rumors flew around. The Resistance was desperate for information." She turned to Mozzie. "You have heard of the Cinderella drug?"

He nodded. "I've taken advantage of its properties on occasion, always for an excellent cause, of course."

"In French brothels, another one was used in the early twentieth century. It is called Milady. It was named after Milady de Winter in The Three Musketeers and includes some cocaine. I do not know of anyone who uses it now, but back then drug laws were not so strict. There was a chemist, France Bloch-Sérazin, who supplied the Resistance with it."

Peter had heard of the chemist. He'd read she made cyanide capsules for the fighters to use if captured. But he'd never heard of Milady. By the way Mozzie's eyes were glittering, he hadn't either.

"I and my friends used Milady on the Boche. It was one of the ways we were able to maintain a hold on them. Thanks to Milady, I obtained information from Bergmann. Huber was also addicted to it." She paused to take a sip of cider. Her face had twisted into an expression of disgust. "He was a pig of a man, that one. But that night I spent with Huber, I got my revenge. I got him drunk, and gave him the drug. He told me how the previous week he had taken a call from Rosenberg. Bergmann was not answering his phone and Rosenberg requested he check on him. Huber went to his office
and discovered Bergmann in the midst of burning documents in his fireplace. When Bergmann left to see Rosenberg, Huber salvaged what documents he could."

"The shipping manifest and equations!" Mozzie interrupted excitedly.

"Précisément," she said with a satisfied nod. "Huber boasted to me that Bergmann had told their unit about a secret plan. Hitler had ordered some of the most valuable paintings in the collection be placed on a U-boat and shipped to Argentina. The U-boat was to be deliberately sunk. It was meant to serve as a sealed vault for masterpieces which Hitler's agents would then be able to retrieve at the dictator's command. Huber was convinced that if Germany didn't win the war and something happened to Hitler, the documents he rescued would enable him to find the U-boat's location. You see, even then, the Nazis were making contingency plans."

Peter was stunned. All this time he'd had been skeptical of the U-boat's existence. Mozzie was beaming ecstatically at the news.

"Never have I seen anyone so happy at the news of a U-boat," André said, chuckling.

Isabelle settled back into the cushions of the armchair and sipped her cider, a half-smile on her face.

Neal didn't take his eyes off her. "There's no U-boat. Bergmann lied."

She nodded at him with the appreciation of one con artist to another. "Bergmann invented the tale to deceive his own men. I was suspicious of the story from the beginning. Risk the destruction of priceless works of art by placing them in a submarine at the bottom of the ocean? Bah! That is not the act of someone with a sound mind. Rosenberg and his thugs were not fools."

"Were you able to confirm your theory?" Mozzie asked, his look of jubilation replaced by intense curiosity.

"It took a couple of doses of Milady but I knew which strings to pluck to make Bergmann sing. The shipment had left France for Germany as planned, but the Resistance was able to sabotage the railroad track and disable the locomotive. They escaped with the art, but an SS officer on board the train recognized one of the fighters—René. The officer often frequented my nightclub. He had seen René there." She gave a quick shrug. "They kept the club under surveillance and seized him one evening. The boy must have broken down under torture and told Bergmann where the art had been taken." Her frown deepened. "Bergmann may have told him his family would be spared if he talked. I do not know the circumstances."

"Did René have the sheet of equations on him?" Peter asked.

"No. The equations had been discovered on another Resistance fighter they had captured a week earlier. Bergmann gloated how it was sheer luck he asked René about the paper. René did not know what it said but he knew it was a code."

Mozzie stroked his chin. "I wonder why none of the other fighters involved in the rescue have come forward."

"Several groups of Resistance fighters had been captured and murdered around that time. Many of the executions took place in Besançon which was close to the train route to Germany. It is possible that the fighters who stole the art were among them. I shared the information with Rose and we tried to confirm the story with the Resistance. They had no knowledge of a rescued shipment. Rose and I believed that Bergmann recovered the art then shipped it to Hitler."

"Did you ever hear anything more about the paintings?" Neal asked.
She nodded. "Bergmann was dispatched to Berlin for consultations a month later. Upon his return, I used Milady on him. He was very smug. He claimed he had found the cache. His wife was a violinist. He mentioned two works he knew she would love to see." Her face hardened. "Meine Nina he called her. He was quite proud of her. He did not display any guilt for cheating on her." She snorted bitterly. "Droit de seigneur."

"Do you know which paintings they were?" Neal asked.

"Yes, Violin and Candlestick by Georges Braque." She raised a brow. "I believe you are familiar with the piece, non? The other was a work by Matisse, Woman with a Violin. Bergmann was a loyal Boche. I never dreamed that he kept the art for himself. That letter you have from Bergmann . . . It leads me to think Bergmann was yet one more rat preparing his escape."

Neal would not have chosen to sketch Isabelle while she related her history with Bergmann. How could he possibly do her justice when he was listening spellbound to her account? But his fingers apparently had a mind of their own. When André called a break for lunch, he was surprised at how much he'd accomplished.

More importantly, Isabelle was happy. The look in her eyes was the only thanks he needed.

Peter clasped a hand on his shoulder. "You did well," he murmured. "Mozzie and I'll help André. You and Isabelle keep at it."

"I like what you've done," she said, switching to French.

He'd placed her at the piano. André was sitting beside her. "Would you like me to make a painting of it for you?" he asked.

"Something in the style of Matisse?"

"That's what I was thinking. Matisse's interest in music makes it particularly appropriate. The woman in the Matisse painting you mentioned reminds me a little of you."

"You should include a violin, perhaps on a table next to the piano. Matisse was a violinist, and it was a violin which brought you and me together."

He hesitated then decided to broach which could be a sensitive subject. "The piano also could reference René. Was he a pianist?"

"How did you know?"

"His code name isn't a common alias. I assumed he had a musical background to know of Ravel's work."

"He was a superb pianist whose proper milieu was the concert hall. He could perform 'Scarbo' beautifully."

"I'm impressed. That's one of the most difficult pieces in the piano repertoire."

Isabelle studied the sketch wistfully. "I wish I could have made a recording of him to play for you."

"Would you like me to include an image of René in the painting? Perhaps a small shadow against the wall?"
"Very much. You could include the sheet music for *Gaspard de la nuit* on the piano, not that I could play it." She glanced down at her knuckles thickened from arthritis. "Time has not been kind to my hands, but I still sing. André tells me you play and sing as well. We should give the others some entertainment while they prepare lunch. You will find sheet music in the piano bench."

Many of the songs were ballades from the '40s and unfamiliar to Neal. When she was younger, Isabelle's voice must have been beautiful. Even now there was a smoky timbre that evoked scenes of the cabaret. She knew Edith Piaf well, and her stories of the famous chanteuse entertained everyone during lunch as they feasted on pâté de campagne, cheese, and salads.

Isabelle related accounts of the songs which had been written by Resistance fighters to boost morale. In between the stories, Mozzie offered to broker her fee for assisting them with the con.

"Leave it to me," he assured her. "André can vouch for my negotiating skill."

Peter looked a little nervous at his words but didn't dispute them. It was understood that André and Isabelle would both receive cuts in the money obtained from selling the forgery. If Adler wound up paying anything near what he'd last offered—ten million euros—funding wouldn't be an issue.

Isabelle had heard of the fractal code Lévy developed but was unable to provide any information on how to decrypt it. She provided Mozzie with a couple of additional names of former Resistance fighters who might know more. "You are not alone in asking about it," she added. "Someone else has recently been making inquiries. My friends tell me he asks about the use of fractals during the war. He has offered to pay handsomely for any information."

"Do you know who he is?" Peter asked.

"One of my friends spoke with him. The man called himself Dimitris, but my friend was suspicious. He said he looked German to him. White hair, heavyset, with prominent jowls."

Peter exchanged looks with Neal. That could have been a description of Karl Huber. Peter offered to provide her with a photo, and Isabelle volunteered to show it to her friend. The knowledge that the son of a man she despised could be in Paris appeared to heighten her desire to participate in the con. If she'd been a little younger, Neal suspected she would have jumped on a plane to assist them in New York.

By the time they left, André and Isabelle were fully on board. André would not only fence Neal's forgery but he also offered to meet with Dimitris. If the man turned out to be Huber, they now had an additional way to lure him into their net.

How to play the new information was the main topic during the drive back to Paris.

"If it is Huber," Peter said, "we could mount a sting and capture him, but we'd lose any chance of smoking his associates out of hiding."

"Huber must not be allowed to escape," Mozzie insisted from his position hunched over the steering wheel. "Isabelle sacrificed so much during the war and was rewarded with nothing. This is payback."

He wouldn't get any argument from Neal on that. There was now an added dimension to what had been a con to bring down Adler and Ydrus. It was up to them to show the bravery and resourcefulness Isabelle had.

"Neal, what was that reference to Scarbo?" Peter asked. "I'm not familiar with the name."
"Gaspard de la nuit is a collection of poems written by Aloysius Bertrand in the early nineteenth century. Ravel wrote a famous piano composition based on some of the selections."

"Bertrand delved into the world of medieval fantasy in his poems," Mozzie added. "Many of the themes are dark. He's been described as the progenitor of poètes maudits. You can think of him as the Allen Ginsberg of his generation."

"How does Scarbo fit into Bertrand's work?" Peter asked.

"Astute question." Mozzie's face flushed as he drove the little Citroen ever faster. "Scarbo was a small creature resembling a vampire. He delighted in tormenting artists, poets and musicians. In Bertrand's poem he'd leap about their bedrooms at night, haunting their dreams while biting their necks to feast on their blood."

Peter raised a brow at Neal. "Scarbo has some similarities to Astrena. Do you think there's a connection?"

"God, I hope not." Neal felt his neck. "Nope, no bite marks. Let's leave Scarbo as Bertrand's nightmare." He turned to Peter. "You haven't asked me about the Matisse Isabelle mentioned."

Peter gave a half-smile. "I was waiting for you to bring it up."

Neal noticed Mozzie's eyes locked on him in the rearview mirror. "The answer is no, I didn't see it in the chalet. It's tempting to think Bergmann gave both paintings to his wife. When Klaus and I broke into the house, we didn't search it. The Braque was in the living room. I got a glimpse of the dining room, but it was dark. I didn't see anything noteworthy."

"So it could still be there," Mozzie said.

"It's possible," Neal agreed. "The painting's listed on the manifest."

"Bergmann may have considered it too risky to steal two paintings," Peter mused. "He may have intended to return to steal it at a later time. Another possibility is that Klaus returned to the chalet at a later date after you discovered the Braque was authentic. He may have wanted to investigate if there were any other treasures to be uncovered."

"You could ask Chantal to call Klaus's mother this week," Mozzie suggested, the yearning of the treasure hunter clear in his voice.

But Peter shut down that suggestion immediately, pointing out their focus had to be on the con, not treasure hunts.

As they neared the Paris city limits, Sara texted: *U free to talk?*  
*Call u back in 2 hrs?*

*I have plum wine on ice.*

*No clue what u mean.*

Neal looked up to see Peter watching him with amusement. Neal hadn't bothered concealing his smile as he texted.

Last month, he and Sara had discussed giving themselves another chance. Since then, she'd been away on an assignment in Chicago. When she left, he hadn't decided whether to give it another
whirl. That was before he knew he was hotwired to a Greek goddess. Neal sighed inwardly. Their past dating history had been so abysmal, they'd compared it to a curse. Now he had a real one to contend with, too. On the other hand, he'd repeatedly insisted to Peter he wasn't letting it affect his life. It was time to prove it. A couple of dates wouldn't hurt anything. With their track record, they'd probably call it quits soon anyway.

In July they made a pact to keep any future dates between them a secret from well-meaning inquisitive friends. That way when they broke up, they'd be spared yet another round of commiserations, advice, and embarrassment for all concerned. When Sara was in New York, she stayed in the condo of a friend who was on temporary assignment to London. The apartment was just south of Columbia University. It made the perfect clandestine meeting place for staying off everyone's radar.

Sara likened their situation to the movie Clueless, claiming she was worse than Neal, but he doubted it. They'd adopted the board game Clue to plot their future dating strategy and hoped to avoid killing anyone in the process. Neal's code name was Professor Plum. Hers was Miss Scarlet.

Peter knew better than to ask who Neal was texting, but that didn't stop him from casting a few inquisitive looks. He'd be outta luck. This was one mystery that would stay that way.

Notes: Peter was right about the church looking spooky. Others have thought so as well. It was featured in a Doctor Who episode called "Vincent and the Doctor," where Van Gogh saw a demon through the church windows. Normally the plots in my Crossed Lines series don't leak into Caffrey Conversation, but this story is an exception. Just like FBI cases, plots don't always wrap up neatly in one story. I wrote about Neal, Van Gogh, and the supernatural in my blog post, "The Artist and the Supernatural." If you're interested in learning more about the curse, the blog post "The Road So Far" has short summaries of the Crossed Lines stories. Details about how Neal was diagnosed with the curse are in my previous story, Dark Rabbit.

Rose Valland and France Bloch-Sérazin are historical figures, but I invented the drug Milady. Bloch-Sérazin was a chemist who provided drugs for the Resistance. She was arrested in 1942 and executed by the Germans in 1943.

A belated Happy Mother's Day to all the moms! If you'd like to relive Neal's last Mother's Day, it's described in Penna's vignette "Homecoming."

Blog: Penna Nomen & Silbrith Conversation: www.pennasilbrithconversation.blogspot.com
Chapter Visuals and Music: The Harlequin's Shadow board on the Caffrey Conversation Pinterest website: www.pinterest.com/caffreycon
New pins include several of Auvers-sur-Oise, the Matisse painting, and a recording of Ravel's "Scarbo."
"Tuesday evening, your place?"

As Neal asked the question, he heard a rap on his bedroom door. He placed his hand over the phone and called out, "I'll be right there."

"Is that Peter?" Sara asked.

"Yeah. He must have finished his emails."

"You can tell me the rest tomorrow. I'll cook my standard—sushi and maki rolls from the local shop on Broadway."

"Don't forget the mochi ice cream."

"No chance of that. I found a new flavor I think you'll like. Later, Professor."

"See ya, Scarlet." Neal sprang off the bed to open the door.

"Anyone I know?" Peter asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Private lives, right?"

"Of course. Did you ask her out?"

Neal didn't deign to answer, letting a half-smile suffice. Peter was free to interpret it any way he chose. "Any news from New York?"

"As a matter of fact, yes. I just got off the phone with Travis. I would have put him on speaker, but since you were otherwise engaged . . ."

Neal walked into the living room and sprawled onto the couch. "Fully in work mode now. What's up?"

Peter pulled up a red leather chair to sit next to him, his expression turning serious. "It's Kramer."

Neal shot upright. "Travis got proof?"

Peter nodded. "Philip Kramer, the head of D.C. Art Crimes, is the Ydrus informant."

They'd known that the mole was someone within Art Crimes. For the past several weeks, Travis's team had been monitoring their communications. Neal had tried not to let personal animosity color his judgment of a man who'd been a thorn in his side practically ever since he began working at the FBI. No need to now.

"The breakthrough came when Travis received permission to hack the unit's personal computers," Peter said.

"I'm sorry it's Kramer."

Peter shot him a surprised look. "After all the mean-spirited actions he took against you, I would
have expected you to be happier."

Neal shrugged. "He was your mentor. You've been friends for a long time. For your sake, I'd hoped it was one of the other members of the unit."

Peter's mouth tightened. "I appreciate that. Kramer's been so blatant in his attempts to discredit you, I had difficulty in believing he could be the mole. I thought it was more likely someone else was sending him false reports about you."

"When he listed me as a person of interest with Sterling-Bosch, I wondered the same thing." That still rankled. Neal had discovered last month that Kramer had warned Sara's insurance company about him. Peter had worked with the company's CEO, R.W. Bosch, to quickly clear his name. Otherwise, the damage to his reputation could have been severe.

"Kramer tried to sabotage your candidature to join the Interpol Art Crimes task force. He's lectured me about how you wouldn't be able to give up your old ways." Peter gave a mirthless chuckle. "I insisted you'd turned your life around. What I didn't realize was that he had as well."

Hearing how Peter stood up for Neal helped to counteract the bitterness. "What did Travis discover?"

"He drilled in on the theft of Raphael's *St. George and the Dragon* last summer. That was the first time Kramer revealed his hostility, not overtly, but in his refusal to allow your participation in the case. Travis said Kramer had a personal server set up to handle his files and email. Aidan was able to penetrate it this weekend. He found buried in the files an email from Kramer to a person he addressed as Python concerning the theft."

"He wrote the head of Ydrus?"

Peter's jaw hardened as he nodded. "It's an ironclad case. We only found out about Python last spring. Kramer was writing her six months earlier."

"What did he say in the email?"

"He was furious that Python had reneged on a deal to frame you for the theft of the painting. In his email he reminded Python that he hadn't reported seeing the image of Klaus on the museum surveillance footage."

"So Klaus did steal the painting!"

"We suspected that might be the case and this confirms it."

Neal had wondered if Klaus stole the painting to catch his attention. If he believed what Klaus told him in the virtual reality sequence, last summer Klaus had already made up his mind to make an overture to Neal to rejoin his crew. Now he knew that was a lie, concocted by Klaus or Rolf to hide the early frame attempt. "Did Kramer refer to Klaus as the Leopard?"

"It's in the same email. The email was in the draft folder and appears never to have been sent."

Peter was watching him closely, probably trying to assess how shaken he was by the findings. Peter didn't have to worry. Everything Neal heard simply reinforced his feelings about Klaus. "Kramer may have intended to delete the names before sending the email then changed his mind."

Peter shrugged. "It's usually a stupid mistake that trips someone up. Travis said Kramer apparently never deletes any emails. The draft was buried so deep, he undoubtedly forgot about it."
"What was the date?"

"August 17, 2004. At that time I'd heard of the Leopard but didn't know his identity. No one at Interpol or the Bureau did either, or so we thought. It was only when you fingered him in the fall that we were able to put a name to the alias. Now we have proof that at least as far back as last summer Kramer knew about both Python and the Leopard." Peter took a long breath and stood up. "Minibars were meant for times like this. You want a drink?"

"Definitely. We'll put it on Gordon's tab."

Peter retrieved a Belgian beer and Neal poured himself a glass from an open bottle of Chablis. How long had Kramer been working with Ydrus? How had they managed to recruit him? Until Kramer was interrogated they likely wouldn't find out much more. "Before we knew who the informant was, we'd discussed leaving him in place to use for the con. Is that still the game plan?"

"More than ever," Peter said, clinking glasses with him. "We now have our funnel to feed false reports to Ydrus. Travis and Jones are reviewing the evidence with Hughes this afternoon. I'm sure he'll agree, but we'll discuss it on Wednesday when we're back at the office."

"I wonder why Ydrus decided against framing me."

Peter considered for a moment as he sipped his beer. "Rolf or Klaus could have talked Python out of it. Perhaps that was when Rolf hatched the scheme to recruit you for their crew while letting you continue at the FBI."

"Or they may have thought I would have gone off grid if they tried anything. They didn't have much to blackmail me with. There would have been no reason for me to sign up with them."

"Klaus admires you. He may have wanted to spare you the distress that being arrested would have caused."

Neal snorted his skepticism. "That virtual hellhole he imprisoned me in was tough love?"

"Perhaps in Klaus's mind it was or Rolf could have convinced him. It's possible Klaus honestly believes you'll be happier working with him."

"Then why did Kramer continue to be so hostile to me?"

"It does appear to be a contradiction," Peter agreed, "but there may have been a disagreement between Python and the Mansfelds on how to exploit you. She could be less interested in your New York contacts. She may have continued to argue to reel you in immediately and forego the complexities of long cons."

"You think Python's an impatient serpent?"

Peter nodded. "And a ruthless one. We've been working to increase any possible friction between the Mansfelds and Ydrus. With Kramer as a mouthpiece, our task is now easier."

It had been a close call. If Kramer had planted the evidence about him, it would have been difficult to fight. Neal hadn't established a very long track record. He'd even admitted to Peter that before he'd gone to work for the FBI, he'd considered stealing the Raphael to get Kate's attention. The tables were now turned. Kramer would be the one getting played.

Matra Mountains north of Budapest, Hungary.
Rolf watched his brother stomp up the mountain trail west of the castle. He'd hoped the hike would calm Klaus down, but so far any perceived benefit was minimal. Klaus had been seething ever since he heard the news.

Luckily Anya had been occupied with the Russian arms dealer all morning. It would be counterproductive for Klaus to confront her. The mood he was in was dangerous for both of them. Here in the forest, they were far away from Anya's spies. Klaus could vent without fear of being overheard.

He'd been on a short fuse ever since the latest Arkham Files story was published. Making the villain a leopard—and a devolved one at that—was more galling to him than Rolf would have imagined. Klaus took it far too personally. All he saw was that he'd been depicted as an object of loathing and revulsion, a mindless tool who'd carried out orders to torture Neal.

Klaus refused to see the hidden meaning. That leopard wasn't evil by nature. It had been corrupted by others. Peter's concealed warning to Rolf was loud and clear. It was a mistake to align themselves with Ydrus. And Rolf had to admit, Peter made a valid point. The events of the past week were a confirmation.

Klaus spun around to face him. "Did you know about this?"

"No. Anya didn't tell me either."

He grunted. "We could have eventually come to an arrangement with Gordon. He's exactly the kind of ally we need. Now he'll never agree to work with us. And that Leila was the instrument of this idiocy?" He cursed and picked up a fallen branch, snapping it in two.

"How did Anya find out about her?" Rolf asked, keeping his voice even-pitched. They'd come to an overlook from where they could see a vast expanse of rugged mountains in front of them. The panorama should encourage Klaus to think in terms of the big picture.

"That was my mistake," he admitted bitterly. "It was when we discussed stealing the Hilliard miniature in London. She initially planned to send me to Saint Petersburg for the Hermitage job. I suggested she hire Leila for the Hilliard. At the last moment, Anya changed her mind and sent me instead." He flung the branch pieces off the overlook. "Sometimes I feel like I'm being jerked around on a chain," he muttered.

It was hardly a surprise that Klaus chafed visibly at the restrictions Anya and her Ydrus organization imposed. He felt the same way. But for now, Ydrus was a necessary evil.

Klaus scanned the vista. "And do you know who we have to thank for the debacle?" Without giving Rolf a chance to respond, he plunged ahead. "Neal and Peter."

"What are you talking about?"

"When Anya told me what happened, I had one of our operatives find out if Gordon had received any visitors in prison. Neal and Peter were listed on the prison log report for Friday evening. You know Neal's history with Leila. I'd bet anything he was the one who fingered her to the police."

"Think about what you're saying," Rolf objected. "Peter was with him. That would mean he was helping, too."

"Aren't you the one trying to convince me that Peter wants to team up with us? What does this show? That he intends to compete with Ydrus? Peter already has Neal in his pocket. Now he has Gordon Taylor, as well."
Could Klaus be right? Was Peter outflanking them at their own game?

"During his trip to Paris in June, Neal had stayed at the hotel Chantal liked so much," Klaus continued. "I checked and he stayed there again with Peter this weekend. Not only that, but in the very suite we always reserved." Klaus turned to face him. "You're the psychologist. What do you make of that?"

Rolf wasn't about to give him an answer. Peters' gambit was an intriguing one, demanding further study. Had Neal told him about the history of the suite or had he discovered it on his own? "Find out all you can about their activities while they were in Paris."

Klaus nodded. "Already in progress. They'll need to be monitored even more closely in New York. I'm fighting fires on multiple fronts. Anya grows increasingly impatient. If it weren't for Huber, she'd insist we move ahead and bring Neal in."

"Another reason you must still your anger. She's our pipeline to Huber. She controls all communications with him." Huber had earned himself a grace period when he claimed to have information which would lead to a sunken U-boat filled with treasure. "Has Anya discovered what evidence he has?"

"Not yet, but he's being tailed wherever he goes. He was in Paris recently. He told Anya that he has the inside track on a French Resistance fighter who has direct knowledge of the paintings," Klaus's face darkened. "Now, with the debacle over Gordon Taylor, locals will no longer want to work with us. Ydrus will become a pariah. She'll need to spend double, maybe triple the price, and even then the talent will be inferior."

"This should teach her a lesson in patience. We can use this as an example if she objects to our plans for Neal and Peter. We're the ones who are on track. We're the ones who supply her with art."

Klaus's face was no longer flushed with anger. A good sign. "You'd mentioned the day would come when we'd want to sever our ties."

"But it's not yet here," Rolf cautioned. "You'll need to maintain your intimacy with Anya until we're ready."

He nodded agreement. "She slipped this job past me. It won't happen again."

"Good. Any news on Bianka?" Anya had designed the plan to use her sister as another means of controlling Neal. The blonde beauty was an artist and a talented forger. If the plan worked, soon she'd be receiving master classes from Neal. She'd been installed at Columbia during the summer and they'd arranged for her to have the studio next to Neal's. Anya had devised a gradual escalation of her use with the objective of making Neal fall in love with her. Although her plan had potential, Rolf much preferred his own strategy. They'd abducted Neal in July and implanted false memories which would resurface once they played the Vermeer trigger. Soon Neal would once again be theirs to employ as they wished and if the signals were correct, Peter would be as well. Bianka's role was as additional insurance. She'd become an essential ingredient in the second trigger.

"I'm surprised she hasn't progressed further," Klaus admitted. "We crafted the ideal personality for Neal. He should find her irresistible. But she's had a string of back luck. It was understandable her progress was delayed when Neal returned to New York from California. He was on medical leave for a week and didn't go to his studio. She'd asked him out but had to cancel when she developed the flu. Then he was out of town for a week. She tried to call him this past weekend, not realizing he was in Paris. Anya's ordered her to ask him out again."
"And she's impatient with us?" Rolf snorted his disdain. "Our plan proceeds well. Neal shows no sign of being affected by the memories we planted. Herr Doctor has analyzed the monitoring results and concurred." Not that Rolf placed much reliance on Erasmus Penfold's verdict. The neuropsychologist was as unethical as Anya, but Rolf had reviewed the reports and videos personally.

"I don't share your confidence." Klaus scanned the valley below. A lone hawk soared upward, rafting on a thermal. "There are too many references in Diana's latest story to Neal's abduction. Injuries that disappear? Disguises? Dreams which appear real? I don't like it. Have the memories already resurfaced?"

"The team knows Neal was held captive, and they know he wasn't injured. They're playing a fishing game now, trying to provoke a reaction. If a few memories seep through, they shouldn't present a problem. Last fall when Neal had PTSD after you faked your death, he hid his symptoms. He'd be even more likely to do so this time. We'll continue monitoring his condition. If the situation warrants, we'll only need twenty-four hours to pull the second trigger."

Klaus nodded. "Abort the Vermeer? That could be our best strategy if you're confident about Peter. There's been no evidence that anyone suspects we're alive. We would have heard about it from Kramer."

Klaus could be right. Rolf longed for the day he could reveal his identity to Peter. The second trigger would hasten that moment. Who did Peter think Azathoth was? That thought kept Rolf up at night. Klaus believed no one knew they'd faked their deaths. Rolf wasn't so sure. But if Peter had figured it out, he wasn't telling anyone. Could it be that Peter was manipulating White Collar like Rolf was Ydrus? Rolf kept his smile to himself over that intoxicating prospect.

Klaus cocked an eyebrow. "You don't think the astrolabe in the story is a reference to the Vermeer painting?"

"Not necessarily. Diana's been using an armillary sphere for months. Ever since I forged the Galileo manuscript, I've been teasing Peter." Rolf was confident that Peter as a fellow astronomy enthusiast would appreciate Rolf's knowledge of antique astronomical instruments. "More likely it's another signal from Peter that he's open to being recruited by Azathoth." Rolf chuckled. "Two astronomy puzzle-masters working together, while you and Neal plunder the world's museums."

"Are you sure Peter's not playing you?"

"No, but I'm confident I understand his motivations. There's no indication that Neal recalls anything about the theft of The Astronomer. If the French had discovered it's been replaced with Bianka's forgery, we would have heard."

"Shouldn't we verify that the forgery's still in place?"

"That's not easily done," Rolf admitted. "The French have changed their security protocol on their off-site warehouse. Any attempt to examine the forgery is too risky. We don't want to raise a premature alarm."

The original now hung in Rolf's study in the castle. If they played their hand correctly, they might not even need to blackmail Neal. Simply referencing it would be enough to cause the implanted memories to rise to the surface.

Still, Klaus had a point. Was there any chance that Neal remembered the Vermeer painting? Would Peter have checked? He'd do anything to protect Neal, of that Rolf was convinced.
It was far more likely that Diana had inserted the astrolabe, along with the compendium and compass, as nods to the man they called Azathoth. The underlying signals from Peter were unmistakable. He challenged them to make an offer worth his while. The discussion between him, Neal, and Mozzie at the story’s conclusion about being galactic thieves couldn’t have been clearer. And the news about Gordon Taylor simply reinforced the message. Peter was cutting out Ydrus while preparing the way to go into partnership with him and Klaus. *All in good time, my friend.* . . .

WCWCWCWCWCWCWCWC

On Tuesday morning, Peter’s crew bid farewell to Paris. They went their separate ways at the airport. Neal and Peter took a flight back to New York which would arrive early in the afternoon. Mozzie was heading to Rome but promised to be back in town in time for the party on Thursday evening. A speakeasy party had become a tradition to mark the completion of one of Diana's Arkham Files stories. June and Mozzie hosted it at her mansion. This time the event would also serve to celebrate the launch of the double con against Adler and Huber. For Neal, it had a special significance. It would mark the first time Sara would be participating.

He hadn't seen her since the end of July when she agreed to be part of the con. They'd been keeping in touch by phone and text messages, but there was much Neal hadn't discussed with her, including the slight matter of a curse hanging over his head. He hadn't told Henry yet either. That would be even harder.

When he went to her apartment that evening, he didn't attempt to explain a soul-sucking goddess over dinner. He also left out the extent of his relationship with Leila. Peter might think it was work-related, but as background information for a prospective date it was hardly suitable. Even so, there was no shortage of topics to cover. Over the promised meal of sushi and maki rolls, Neal explained what had transpired with Gordon and Isabelle.

Sara was as spellbound by Isabelle's account as he had been.

"René gave his life," she said. "Isabelle's sacrifice was equally heroic. Those paintings simply have to be recovered."

"And we intend to do just that." Sara didn't know that one painting was already safe. Mozzie was hiding the Braque in his bunker. For months Neal had agonized over that painting. Now he felt like he was its guardian, watching over it till it could be returned to the world.

Sara set down her chopsticks. "Stolen items can develop a life of their own. When I hear about its history, it sometimes acquires a personal significance. It's no longer simply a piece of jewelry. It's a treasured heirloom, the symbol of a wedding, an object which evokes memories of a lost loved one." She brushed a wayward strand of copper hair behind her ear and smiled. "I wind up feeling almost as if I'm rescuing a lost child. Does that sound crazy?"

"Not to me," he assured her. "With me, it's paintings. Those lost masterpieces are calling to me now too." When he'd been a thief in Europe, he rarely stopped to think about the personal connection an owner might have with the object Neal stole. That thief was gone forever. The skills were still there. It was how he used them that had changed. And that enabled him to relate to Sara in a way which would have otherwise been impossible.

"André began spreading the word today about the Braque," he said. "By the time of June's party, we could be celebrating the sale of my forgery."

"The amount you'll likely receive is staggering. That must make you feel proud."
"More than you know. "It's also the opening gambit of the con. That means we'll be seeing a lot more of each other."

"It's about time," Sara declared as she picked up their plates. "I'm off the travel circuit at Sterling-Bosch for two weeks. I assume you know that Henry wants us to meet at his place tomorrow evening."

"Then we'll spend the next weekend on the sailboat. Henry hasn't filled me in on the specifics but I'm sure he'll try to throw us together as much as possible. I hope you won't come down with Matthew-fatigue before we've had our first date."

"Not possible," she affirmed confidently, tossing him a roll of plastic wrap for the leftovers. "Alicia's looking forward to making up for squandered opportunities."

They'd chosen names related to two clueless characters from Jane Austen for their fictitious love interests. Sara's fake boyfriend was Matthew, a nod to Matthew Macfadyen, the actor who played Darcy in the new *Pride and Prejudice* movie. Neal's fake girlfriend was named Alicia after Alicia Silverstone who starred in *Clueless*, an appropriately titled remake of *Emma*. And no one would know that when they mentioned Alicia and Matthew, they were actually speaking about themselves. It was a maneuver designed to keep them from having to lie to their friends.

The Clueless con they'd dubbed it, and it had been a delightful daydream, but that's all it had been. Neal had yet to ask Sara out. Were they having too much fun in the game, scheming about Matthew and Alicia while adopting the names of their *Clue* game pieces to plot strategy? Sara was wearing a scarlet tank top in honor of Miss Scarlet, and Neal wasn't any better. He'd worn a plum-colored t-shirt.

When they'd first discussed the con, they'd promised to keep each other informed of any issues that popped up and there was one gigantic mastodon which needed to be confronted. Back in France, he'd resolved to tell her, but it had sounded much easier when they were separated by thousands of miles.

She pulled a tub out of the freezer. "In honor of the Clueless con, I have plum wine mochi ice cream. The game board is already set up on the cocktail table— ready for us to plot our moves over dessert."

Sara had discovered Neal's love of mochi ice cream balls and was doing her best to keep him supplied. Many thought the rice-shell-coated ice cream was an acquired taste, but then the same could be said about him. For Sara, he'd been cracking the shell on his own secrets. The mastodon prodded him in the back that it was time to for another disclosure.

They took their bowls and sat down on the sofa in front of the game board. The mastodon lumbered behind them, flopped next to Neal, and snuffled in his ear. What are you waiting for?

She watched expectantly as he bit into the ice cream. "Do you like the flavor?"

He nodded judiciously. "Plum's the perfect choice for my character."

She gave a relieved smile. "I thought so. Complex, sophisticated, with a hidden sweetness which reminds me of someone I'd like to know better. I'm glad we settled on Professor Plum for your avatar."

Neal picked up his game piece and held it in his hand. Was that the problem? His character no longer seemed as appropriate. "Perhaps we need to select a new board game."

She raised an eyebrow. "So soon? We've barely started with *Clue*. What do you have in mind?"
"Something with a witch theme."

"Like Bewitched?" She smiled. "Playing Samantha could be fun. When I was in Chicago, I saw the movie with Will Ferrell and Nicole Kidman. But plotting over two different games could get confusing. We probably should either stick to Clue or—"

"Stop," he said, interrupting. "I wish that was all it was. Just another game." He took a breath. "I haven't told you about all my cases."

"Nor have I explained about mine," she said, her expression growing serious. "I thought we understood there are some details of our work we're not allowed to share."

"And I'm in full agreement. But Peter and I became involved in some non-FBI investigations over the past several months. They've been eye-opening experiences about a world neither one of us knew existed." He placed his game piece in the box with the other characters. "Do you remember the scene in The Crypt when Neal tells Sara about all the bizarre creatures he's been seeing in Arkham—ghasts, nightgaunts, and zoogs?"

She nodded thoughtfully. "It was difficult for him to confide in her. Are you telling me you have a similar situation?"

"Yeah."

"Then I hope I can be as understanding as Arkham Sara was. You better start from the beginning."

So Neal did. From the dork curse in New Jersey, his and Sam's abduction by vampires and the art forger Curtis Hagen's transformation into a demon to the witches and the pure-blood vampires they'd encountered. And although he felt guilty about dumping everything at once upon her, it also felt good to finally get it off his chest.

Sara's face ran the gamut from astonishment to apprehension as the full significance of his words sank in. The world she thought she knew would be forever changed. "I remember you mentioned a swamp witch and vampires last May. I thought you were joking, but you weren't." She scanned his face for confirmation.

"No, although I passed it off as a tease. I assumed that'd be the end of it, but it didn't turn out that way."

"Does the team at White Collar know about Astrena?"

He nodded. "Jones, Diana, Travis—even Hughes—they've all been informed. We brought them in at the end of July. But my cousins Henry and Angela know nothing about it. Henry only returned to town yesterday. I plan to tell him this weekend. As for Angela, I hope she never knows how close she came to being seduced by a vampire."

"I've never heard of Astrena. You'd think that someone who supposedly is the mother of vampires and witches would be more famous. She'd rank right up there with Aphrodite and Athena."

"The A-list of goddesses?"

Sara smiled but it didn't extend to her eyes. The news was hitting her hard. It made Neal regret more than ever he had to tell her. Last month, he saw a therapist because of Rolf's mind games. Now he was consulting psychics. Sara must wonder what would be next. How would this affect their future?

"Mozzie's found additional references to her. He's in Rome now doing additional research."
"The most recent artist that you believe was her victim—the man in Connecticut "—she paused for a moment— "How long was his illness?"

"His widow said the symptoms started about a year before he succumbed."

"You described the symptoms as a gradual wasting away?"

"The widow said it was like his strength was being drained off," Neal admitted, "and none of the medical experts they consulted could provide a cause. The style of his art became progressively darker. He often dreamed of a woman whom we believe was either Astrena or one of her sisters."

"You said you don't exhibit any physical symptoms. How about dreams?"

"A few in the spring," he admitted. "Sam and I both were dreaming of someone. We never saw their faces. Mine was a blonde from Mozart's time. The Winchesters think Mozart may have been one of Astrena's victims. Hagen felt himself drawn to Goya who has also been identified as a probable victim. Then, in Shepherdstown . . ." Neal hesitated. She'd really think he was nuts, but she deserved to know. "When the pure-blood vampire attacked me, I think I saw Astrena inside my head."

Her hand reached out for his. "You saw her?" He could hear the fear mixed with incredulity in her voice.

"Yeah, a figure of ice. Not very distinct. I made a drawing of her for the Winchesters."

She nodded absently a moment, not saying anything. Was she thinking of how to tactfully distance herself? He wouldn't blame her. He wished he could put ten thousand miles between himself and Astrena.

Sara looked up. "But you haven't seen her since?"

"No, and Sam isn't having any dreams either."

"I'm glad you reminded me of our Arkham counterparts. We mock them for being clueless but they have an inner reserve of strength which lets them survive whatever gets tossed their way."

"Diana modeled those characters on us."

"And we need to live up to that standard," she said. "Arkham Sara didn't abandon Neal even though anyone associating with him could be targeted by Azathoth, ghasts, or whatever other monster the Arkham Round Table dreams up. Nor will I."

"Arkham Neal also gave Sara the chance to back out. When I read that bit, I never thought I'd be in a similar situation, but here we are. Before I found out about the curse, I'd planned to ask you out . . . on a real date."

This time the smile wasn't only on her lips. "You'd like to give Alicia and Matthew a chance?"

He nodded. "If you're willing. You know the risks. The last thing I want is anyone's pity."

"None of us knows what lies ahead. You have a curse. I could be run over by a truck. The takeaway for me in what you're saying is that we should live in the moment."

"I'd like that as well." He knew he'd thrown her for a loop. Despite her words, she couldn't disguise the concern in her eyes. But she didn't dwell on it. She didn't overwhelm him with concern about his health.
"So now we're confronted with another dilemma," Sara went on. "When?"

"Next week? We could go out to dinner. Is there anything else you'd like to do?"

"How about Riffs? You've told me it's the hottest rock club in the Village, and I've never heard you sing in public."

Neal was delighted at her choice. He knew just the song. "If we go midweek, there'll be less chance of Henry spotting us. He often goes there on Saturday nights with Eric. It's also possible Mozzie would be there."

Her eyes widened. "I wouldn't have thought he was into rock music."

"He's not. Mozart and Bach are more his style. But Mozzie recently developed an interest in what he calls angst-beat. He recites Ginsberg poetry while beating a drum." Neal chuckled. "I heard him last weekend and he wasn't bad. He was there with his girlfriend Janet. They were both wearing wigs."

"Not a bad idea," she said, her eyes lighting up mischievously. "Should we do the same?"

He retrieved his game piece from the box. "I wish I could but I've performed there too often. They'd recognize my voice and wonder why I was in disguise."

"They don't know me." She gazed up at the ceiling dreamily. "I could be a ditzy blonde, like my namesake Alicia Silverstone in Clueless."

Sara as a blonde? That would be interesting. She'd already masqueraded as Rose Tyler on the Doctor Who set. He couldn't wait to see what she'd come up with for her Alicia disguise.

"That will be a date to be remembered," she declared, "but enough of daydreams. Duty calls." She picked up her Miss Scarlet game piece and set her down in the ballroom on the game board while Neal pulled out the other pieces from the box.

"The main suspects we'll need to watch carefully are Henry—let him be Colonel Mustard—and Elizabeth," he warned.

"She can be Mrs. White," Sara suggested. "June is her accomplice. She'll be Mrs. Peacock. Should we name anyone Reverend Green?"

"Perhaps Mozzie. He likes to think of himself as a love guru. But I'm not worried about him intriguing against us. We suspect El and Henry are working together to manipulate the romance between you and me in Diana's stories."

"Did you get confirmation?"

"I overheard June on the phone with El last week. Some of the ideas they were discussing have Henry's fingerprints on them. It also became apparent that Diana and Peter have become our unwitting allies. June is convinced that I'm dating Bianka."

Sara raised a suspicious eyebrow. "Who's Bianka? Should I be jealous?"

"You have nothing to fear. She's a new student from Hungary and has the studio next to mine. She invited me to a concert in appreciation for me helping her with her English. I took her to Riffs a couple of weeks ago, but she's purely in the friend zone."

"And Diana and Peter know about her?"
"They've seen her at my studio. Bianka's blonde, attractive. They may have leaped to a false conclusion but it wasn't because of anything I said."

"This could work to our advantage. If Henry should happen to see you with a blonde, he'll probably assume it's Bianka. He hasn't met her, has he?"

"No." Neal smiled as he considered the possibility. "If Henry happens to draw the wrong conclusion, it wouldn't be my fault. Once classes resume, Bianka will be swarmed by admirers. I doubt strongly she'll invite me to any other concerts."

"Good. I wouldn't want her to wilt on the vine while she pines for my Matthew."

*My Matthew.* He liked the sound of that. "El and June must have persuaded Diana to go along, but my hunch is she's a reluctant participant in the matchmaker conspiracy. She could be equally useful for us. I was able to persuade her to adjust the story line in her latest story, *Cinereous Skies.*"

"Space Bends was your idea?"

He grinned. "Arkham Neal needed a little excitement in his life. Too bad Diana tweaked it. My concept was much more stimulating."

She snickered. "I'm sure they'll contact me for more ideas since they think I'm their willing accomplice."

Cons within cons. Peter thought life was complicated with a double con against Adler and Ydrus. That was only the half of it. Kate once told him he always complicated things but that was what made him fun. Sara appeared to enjoy it just as much, and her con artist skills were every bit as good as Kate's if not better.

Sara slid closer to him on the sofa. "You know, I see no reason to wait all the way to next week for our first date. Let's call that our second."

He slipped an arm around her and squeezed her waist gently through the sleek tank top. "What an excellent suggestion. It doesn't seem right to start the con without letting Matthew and Alicia first have a chance."

She ran a finger around the collar of his t-shirt. The touch of her finger thrust any thoughts of Astrena into the cellar. "We had dinner just the two of us. We exchanged secrets. I can light a couple of candles, put on some music—"

"—or we can make our own," he said, losing himself in her green eyes. "We've kissed for Keller's benefit when we went on a fake date."

"We pretended to be making out in front of the guard at Win-Win's headquarters last summer."

"As I recall, Arkham Sara said something about wanting to perform prolonged mouth-to-mouth resuscitation on me. Was that your suggestion?"

She answered with her lips as she cupped his face in her hands.

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*Notes: I assumed that Neal would proceed more slowly with Sara than he would ordinarily because of the current complications in his life. On the other hand, when is Neal's life not complicated? In the*
canon episode "Under the Radar," Sara told Neal making things complicated was his specialty, and he admitted he could teach a master class on the subject. Penna picked up the theme in Caffrey Flashback where Kate said part of what made Neal fun was how he always complicates things. The Clueless con is yet another example. This week I wrote an update for our blog. The post is called "The Clueless Con: A Winning Strategy."

In this chapter Neal and Sara joke about the romantic sparks between Arkham Neal and Sara. The events occurred in Cinereous Skies. As for the meaning of Space Bends, you'll have to ask Neal.

Thanks to Penna for playing complicated bunnyball with me for Sara, Kramer, and the Mansfeld brothers. We enjoyed speculating about the similarities and contrasts between Rolf and Henry, and Win-Win and Ydrus. If you'd like to play along, here are some of the topics. Rolf and Henry both use psychological techniques to achieve their objectives but Henry's sense of decency ensures that his actions are always for the right reasons. Are there any circumstances which would have led Henry to team up with Rolf? Win-Win's reputation in the past was that they sometimes rode roughshod over ethics in their manipulation of data. If Henry's father Robert had become CEO, could they have become the Ydrus of data mining?

Lately, Penna's life has been hijacked by the quest for a new job. Now that the search has reached a successful conclusion, she paused to reflect on the experience. She's written a blog post about it: "Job searching is like an AU." I'm holding myself back from giving spoilers about the twists and turns she's had to navigate, but her perspective is fascinating and brilliantly entertaining at the same time.

Blog: Penna Nomen & Silbrith Conversation: [www.pennasilbrithconversation.blogspot.com](http://www.pennasilbrithconversation.blogspot.com)
Chapter Visuals and Music: The Harlequin's Shadow board on the Caffrey Conversation Pinterest website: [www.pinterest.com/caffreycon](http://www.pinterest.com/caffreycon)
Machiavellian Vindaloo

Federal Building, Lower Manhattan. Wednesday, August 17, 2005.

Peter scanned his crew at the morning briefing—Hughes, Jones, Travis, Diana, and Neal. This was probably the last time they would attend as a group. From now on, they'd need to appear to be working at cross-purposes as they conspired and spied on each other.

The significance of the session wasn't lost on any of them. Travis had swept the room in advance for listening devices.

Travis started off the meeting with an update on Kramer. "We caught a break. The National Gallery of Art had saved the security footage of the days leading up to the theft of the Raphael painting last summer. When we recovered the painting in April, they neglected to delete the file." He hooked his laptop to the projector and flashed an image on the monitor. "Neal, would you like to confirm the identification?"

"I'll be happy to," Neal said, a smile breaking out. "That, my esteemed colleagues, is the rare and elusive Leopard, Klaus Mansfeld."

"I've informed the assistant director about Kramer," Hughes said. "He's agreed to leave him in place for now. The only ones who know of Kramer's duplicity are us and the AD. All relevant information is being stored offsite on Travis's server and that will continue for the duration of the operation."

"Henry has spent the past two weeks sailing off the Atlantic Seaboard, ostensibly on sick leave from the shoulder wound he sustained in Argentina," Neal said. "We want our marks to believe that in reality he's been using a fractal antenna designed by Mozzie to search for the sunken U-boat."

"According to the script, Henry discovered the U-boat location off Cape May this past weekend," Jones said, picking up the thread. He plugged in his laptop to the projector and pulled up a map of the Atlantic Seaboard coastline. "Neal, Henry, Sara, and Mozzie will spend the next weekend on the sailboat. They'll convey the impression that they're investigating the wreck's condition."

"Is Cape May a plausible site?" Hughes asked. "Ilsa and I've visited the seaside resort. It's hard for me to imagine U-boats were close to shore during the war."

"But they were," Jones, the Navy and now U-boat expert pointed out. "Several U-boats were detected off the Atlantic Seaboard in World War II. In 1991 a U-boat wreck was discovered close to the New Jersey coast."

Hughes didn't look convinced. "You say the U-boat was sunk. Wouldn't the torpedoes have caused such extensive damage that any art on board would have been ruined?"

"We intend to spread the rumor that the U-boat was not torpedoed but sunk deliberately," Peter explained. "A skeleton crew placed the boat in a location where the Fuhrer could retrieve it at a later time. The crew escaped by using diving gear."

Hughes nodded slowly. "I'll buy that." He crossed his arms and turned to Neal. "You've found the U-boat. How will you retrieve the art?"

"Henry will borrow funds from Win-Win to pay for a salvage vessel," Neal replied promptly, using air quotes around the word borrow.
"At least that's what Adler will believe," Jones amended. "As for Ydrus, we'll take advantage of Adler's financial backing of Wilhelm Salvage. For the past decade, the company has operated off the Atlantic Seaboard. We believe Adler's been using it to search for the U-boat. Sir, you'll lead Kramer to believe that Neal and Henry partnered with Adler on the salvage operation."

A small smile flitted across Hughes's face. "After the horse hockey he's been shoveling about Caffrey, I'm going to enjoy this. You'll be my eyes and ears, I gather."

"Yes, sir."

"What proof do you intend to have?"

"We have several ideas in mind, but the clincher will be when Neal attempts to sell one of the paintings from the U-boat." Jones displayed a list of art from the shipping manifest they'd found in Huber's safe on the screen. "Which painting did you pick, Caffrey?"

"I've been in an Impressionist mood. There's a lovely Degas in the collection which calls to me."

Neal tossed Jones a USB drive to plug into his laptop. Jones opened it to display the painting on the monitor. Instead of the ballerinas Peter expected, he saw a couple dressed in costume. The man wore a checkered outfit and a mask. He was stretching out his hand to a female dancer who was shying away.

"This is a pastel of Harlequin and Columbine from the artist's late period," Neal explained. "The subject has a particular appeal. The characters Degas depicts are from the early Italian theater, Commedia dell'arte, where all the actors wear masks. Harlequin is one of the most famous. He's a trickster—lighthearted, mischievous, and extremely clever."

"In other words, nothing at all like you," Diana quipped. "What about Columbine?"

"She's also a famous con artist as well as a coquette and a flirt. She's known to toy with the affections of many, including Harlequin."

"A reference to Sara?" Jones asked, raising an eyebrow.

Neal shrugged. "She fits the part. I started the forgery last week. Once our U-boat is supposedly in dry dock, I'll be able to offer it for sale."

"How much is something like that worth?" Travis asked.

"A similar pastel by Degas was sold at a Christie's auction for over twenty million dollars," Neal said nonchalantly, clearly enjoying the low whistle Travis made. "Even on the black market, this should command several million."

"The proceeds will be used to cover expenses," Peter added, "with the remainder eventually to be included in the reimbursement settlement with Adler's victims. We'll make double use of the forgery. Both Kramer and Adler will believe that Neal and Henry recovered the lost masterpieces. The Braque forgery Neal painted is already being offered for sale. We expect to get word shortly that Adler's taken the bait. Most likely Garrett Fowler will conduct the transaction on his behalf. The former FBI agent had been a fugitive since last autumn when he fled the country after a botched attempt to frame Neal."

"I assume the pipeline through Agent Ruiz is operational?" Hughes asked Diana. They believed that Ruiz had maintained his friendship with Fowler since the time they both worked in Organized Crime. Last month the Win-Win team discovered he was leaking information to Fowler. Ruiz had
also taken more than a casual interest in Diana. He was attempting to persuade her to transfer to Organized Crime while hinting he was also interested in her romantically.

"Ruiz has taken me to lunch several times over the past few weeks." She smiled ruefully. "Apparently I become very chatty over a martini. I've been complaining bitterly about the fast ones Neal's pulled at the Bureau. The latest example is that manufactured excuse to visit his cousin in West Virginia. Claiming it was work-related was a bunch of hooey."

Peter enjoyed her take on the trip. He'd rather it be made fun of than think about the issues they had to contend with.

"I also vented my resentment of Neal using us to plan his crimes," she said. "We all know those art heist workshops he gives are mere fronts. He's made us unwitting accomplices in future crime sprees."

Neal smirked happily. "I'll do my best to live up to the reputation you've concocted for me."

Diana turned to Peter and slapped a scowl on her face. "Boss, you're far too indulgent. Neal escapes the case drudgery the rest of us have to put up with. I've also included Henry in my rants. Ruiz is aware of Henry's sailing trip. He mentioned that I'd be wise to document examples of favoritism."

"I'm sure I'll want to boast about my sailing expertise at work," Neal said. "Supplying you with photos to drool over will be no problem."

"I spoke with Sara's boss, R.W. Bosch," Peter said, seizing the reins before Diana and Neal got too carried away. "He's agreed to schedule a lighter workload for her on Sterling-Bosch cases for the duration of the con. He's as eager as us to put Ydrus out of business. In his own mind, Sara is on special assignment for the Bureau, although nothing will be entered into the official file about it. Neal, Henry, and I will meet with her after work to go over her role. Sara will be particularly useful for the Ydrus con."

"Did you decide whether she'll be a double or a triple agent?" Jones asked.

Peter nodded to Neal to answer. "At the moment triple, although it may wind up quadruple," Neal said. "In addition, she'll play two parts. I spoke with Richard and he's agreed to make her up to be Kate."

Richard was Travis's partner and one of Neal's friends from Columbia. A sculptor, he also worked with makeup and prosthetics.

"Part of the con to convince Ydrus that I'm in league with Adler is that Kate will be in town, acting as his representative," Neal explained.

"And reigniting your passion?" Jones asked. "Lover-boy Caffrey. You'll have Kate, Sara . . . It could get steamy."

Neal grinned. "I'm counting on it."

As his fellow agents teased him, Neal seemed completely relaxed. They might joke about the women in his life but no one brought up the goddess who had her hooks in him. Peter had met separately with the agents, advising them not to reference it. Peter likened it in his own mind to a cancer that was in remission. Neal was asymptomatic, and as long as that continued, his wish to have it not be a factor could be honored.

When they'd designed the U-boat con, Peter's greatest fear was that the Mansfelds would pull the
trigger before the team was ready. Now activation of the trigger had to compete with concerns which
could be even more devastating.

**WCWCWCWCWCWCWCW**

When El arrived at Bistro Maurice in SoHo, Henry was already there. The location was close to his
work and convenient to many of the wholesalers El frequented for her business. Could this be called
a business lunch? She doubted the IRS would view matchmaking a legitimate aspect of her catering
activities, but Henry appeared to treat it as seriously as any of his Win-Win cases.

He'd first invited her to the bistro in late July when they conducted their initial face-to-face strategy
session. El could have cloaked their meetings in a euphemism. Henry was, after all, helping to
formulate the plot for Diana's fanfiction, a White Collar sanctioned endeavor to keep Neal and Peter
safe. Matchmaking was merely a subthread.

But as she slid into the booth across from her fellow schemer, she saw no reason to disguise their
strategy, especially since the third member of their conspiracy would be joining them shortly. June
had confronted El last week, suspecting Henry was feeding suggestions to her, and it was a relief to
own up. Henry had taken the news well. He appreciated June's value as the ideal spy to report on
Neal's dating activities.

Bistro Maurice was a good choice for June. She'd like the jazzy vibe with its low lighting, tin ceiling
and photos of musicians on the walls.

"You look tanned and rested," El said. "How's the shoulder?"

Henry flexed his left arm for her. "It feels great. The sailing went well, too. Eric had sailed before,
but not on such a big boat. He's a fast learner."

Eric Vasquez was the architect who'd remodeled Henry's loft. Henry had been dating him for four
months. "How much have you told him about the con?"

He looked at her quizzically. "Did Neal prompt you to ask that? There's no reason for Eric to know
anything about it."

He won't notice all the absences you'll need to make? El kept her thoughts to herself while the
waitress took their drink orders. Henry reminded her of the way Neal behaved with his former
girlfriend Fiona. He'd tried to isolate her from his work and it wound up causing issues between
them. El feared the same would happen to Henry, but she decided not to mention anything. He was
broadcasting a loud mits off my personal life with his expression which reminded her of the look
Neal gave her at their Fourth of July barbecue.

"Has Neal said anything to you about the last story?" he asked as soon as the waitress left, not giving
her the chance to bring up Eric.

"Not much," she said, hiding her smile at Henry's tactic. "Peter commented that Neal expressed
sympathy for how his character felt after the news about his parents. Your idea to have Arkham
Neal's mother have a name similar to his own mother resonated with him. Peter said Neal opened up
about his conflicted feelings toward Meredith on the drive back from West Virginia. Arkham Neal
carries a lot of guilt about Melina. I'm afraid our Neal also faults himself for not having been able to
help Meredith."

"That was my hope. I'm glad Diana left it in. It's better to get those emotions out in the open. I wish
Diana hadn't changed so many of our other ideas. Wasn't Arkham Neal supposed to stay with your
counterparts after the revelations?"

"Mozzie suggested the change at the final Arkham Round Table session before Diana posted the chapter. I hadn't known that he was an orphan in real life. Diana didn't either. She let him write that scene."

Henry looked thoughtful. "So both Neal and Mozzie had unhappy childhoods? That helps to explain the special nature of their friendship."

El took a sip of water. "Mozzie, Peter, Neal—they've all developed strong bonds with their characters. Neal in particular. Peter told me he talks about him as if he were his younger brother."

"He's not the only one," Henry admitted. "It's weird, but now I feel like I have two brothers, too. The older of the two can be a pain in the neck while the younger one brings out the protector in me big time." He winced. "I hope this is working with Rolf and Klaus. It certainly seems to be on us."

She nodded. "Reading how Arkham Neal is helped when he confides in others and places his trust in them must give our Neal something to think about."

"It better," Henry agreed. "Particularly with Sara. I'm convinced that the primary reason they haven't started dating is that Neal is worried about all the skeletons in his closet. He's afraid of hurting her. I thought when he saw how Arkham Neal struggled with the same issues but still confided in Sara, it would spark ideas on how he could clear his own hurdles. No matter what the skeletons are, they can't be worse than having space aliens for parents and monsters chasing you!"

El hoped so too. Neal had found out about the threat posed by Astrena while Henry was away. Judging by Henry's comment, he didn't know yet. She knew Peter was holding Neal to that promise to tell him, but she wished Henry was already aware. Would the curse keep Neal from wanting to date anyone? Attempting to do matchmaking under the circumstances didn't feel right. If it weren't that Neal seemed to enjoy teasing the group about the budding romance in Arkham Files, she would have advised putting their plans on hold.

Henry was clearly oblivious to the crosscurrents. He stood up to beckon to June when she arrived. "Let the conniving begin!"

Neal hadn't told June either. How did he cope with all those secrets bottled up inside? With an inner sigh, El resolutely buried her thoughts about the curse and settled into matchmaker mode.

Over lunch, Henry peppered June with questions about Neal's activities. "Have you heard him mention anything more about Bianka?"

"Did he tell you he took her to Riffs?"

Henry groaned. "That's not good. A rock club? He must have sung. It's the perfect place to show off, and he would have taken full advantage of it. When was this?"

June thought for a moment. "Last weekend he was in Paris so it must have been the previous Saturday."

"Neal hasn't mentioned anything about Bianka to me, and Peter hasn't said anything either," El cautioned. "I wouldn't jump to the conclusion that he's serious about her." She hoped Henry wouldn't ask her to try to find out. Her usefulness as a spy was limited, especially since Peter had warned her to curb any matchmaker tendencies.

"Would Peter tell you if Neal was dating someone?" he asked.
"Not if Neal asked him to keep it a secret."

"And I bet he would have," June said. "Neal's complained more than once about the Round Table's use of romance in the stories. He'll be on the alert for any appearance of meddling."

Rather than appearing gloomy, Henry smiled at June's caution.

"You're enjoying the challenge, aren't you?" El accused.

"Nothing wrong with a guy having some fun while doing a good deed," he said. "Even with the unexpected changes Diana made, Arkham Neal and Sara are progressing. I have several ideas on how to build on the momentum. I'll also perform a background check on Bianka."

June frowned. "Vetting Sara's rivals? Isn't that premature? We don't even know how serious he is about her."

"We can't take a chance of him being hurt again," he insisted, dismissing her concerns.

What would Henry be like once he heard about the curse? Neal had been super-sensitive to them making any comments about Astrena. How would he react to Henry in overdrive? El took a sip of iced tea to brace herself. She sensed stormy weather ahead.

WCWCWCWCWCWCW

As soon as he got off the phone, Neal bounded up the stairs to Peter's office. He paused briefly to knock on the door but he could tell by looking through the glass wall that there was no one in the office with him. Peter was frowning, as he studied something on his computer. Plainly he needed a break. Neal didn't wait for his acknowledgement before charging in.

Peter's eyes narrowed as Neal moved the side chair close to his desk and rested his elbows on the stack of file folders. "I assume you believe whatever you have to tell me is more interesting than Jones's status report on identity fraud cases?"

"I'll let you be the judge," Neal, ever the diplomat, assured him. "Would you prefer me to wait?"

"Does it concern Paris?"

"It does."

Peter swiveled away from his computer and crossed his arms. "Take it away, hotshot."

"André called. A fellow fence has a client interested in the Braque. André's arranged to meet with the fence tomorrow afternoon. We could have our money that same day! André's original asking price, as we agreed, was twelve million euros. The fence offered seven. André countered with ten. It has to be Adler, Peter. No one else would offer so much."

"How do you predict it will go down?"

"It's doubtful the client will be there. André has a photo of Garrett Fowler and will do his best to find out if Fowler's the client. He's prepared to warn the fence that Fowler's treacherous and could stiff them if they're not careful. André's a pro at this, Peter. He'll get the job done."

"I trust your judgment. You told me how André conned the Italian thief Tramonte when Fowler was attempting to frame you last November. Fowler probably knows about the role André played."

"Exactly. Having André fence the Braque will make it seem more believable to Fowler. He's bound
to believe I'm the one offering the painting, even though André won't name the seller."

Peter looked at Neal hopefully. "I don't suppose André will agree to wear a wire?"

"Not a chance. André will want to protect his relationship with the fence. We can't ask for the moon."

"Not even an asteroid?"

Neal shook his head adamantly. "Not happening. But you won't mind when you hear what else André told me. Isabelle has an appointment scheduled with the man who calls himself Dimitris and we believe to be Karl Huber. That's to be on Saturday."

"That's great," Peter said, even as his frown began to form, "but I thought we agreed André would meet with him."

Neal shared his concern about a woman in her eighties being part of the con. "She insists on doing it. André explained that his mother has a new purpose in life after meeting with us."

"To exact revenge on the family of the man she despised?"

Neal nodded. "That's why André agreed. Gordon will see to it that she's protected." Neal could relate to Isabelle's desire. He felt the same way. Adler, Klaus, and Rolf had manipulated and deceived him. This was his opportunity for payback.

A con which became personal carried a heightened risk factor. From the way Peter was eyeing him, he understood that as well. But for the best con artists, having skin in the game ensured single-minded focus on the objective. There would be no slip-ups. He and Isabelle would both emerge with smiles on their faces.

WCWCWCWCWCWCWC

That evening, when Neal and Peter arrived at Henry's loft in NoHo, east of the Village, they were the first ones to arrive—a point Neal didn't fail to highlight to Henry.

"When you gave the time, did you factor in the Sara allowance?" Neal asked as he walked in.

"What are you talking about?" Henry asked.

"Sara is always at least thirty minutes late," Neal explained patiently. "Generally, that doesn't extend to an hour, but it's been known to occur." A slight exaggeration, but it was good to remind Henry that Sara was just a pal, someone to be joshed about and nothing more.

"Good," Peter remarked. "That gives me time for the tour. I haven't seen the loft since the remodeling work was finished." He glanced around the vast central living area. "Very impressive."

Neal agreed. Contemporary furniture, exposed beams, hardwood floors, with floor-to-ceiling windows on the wall overlooking the terrace. Hanging prominently on one wall was the abstract of clouds which Neal had painted for his first year exhibition. He considered it an autobiographical piece. Henry had insisted on purchasing it despite Neal's attempt to give it to him.

Neal was most envious of Henry's spacious kitchen. It was an ironic touch since Henry didn't cook. Eric did, though. Was the inclusion a promising sign? Neal sniffed the aroma of curry. Henry had promised a feast fit for a maharaja courtesy of the Indian restaurant on the corner, and the containers were staying hot on warming trays. Henry might not be able to fry an egg, but with takeout he was a
Henry opened a beer for Peter. In a nod to Neal he'd bought a German Riesling while grumbling that anyone who drank wine with Indian food was asking for bad karma.

They went outside on Henry's terrace while waiting for Sara. The view couldn't compare with Neal's but the lounges were more comfortable. Henry was on the top floor of the building and looked south toward the Brooklyn Bridge.

While they waited, he and Peter filled Henry in on their trip to Paris. Neal was able to slip in a reference to the breakup with Fiona. "This con proves that there's a silver lining to every disaster. A girlfriend would have caused issues."

Henry smiled. "I see your point. You're supposed to be hot and heavy first with Sara then with Kate. You don't think it will be awkward for you and Sara pretending to have strong feelings for each other?"

Neal paused. Three seconds was an adequate amount of time to indicate his earnest contemplation. "A little. It's like kissing a sister, but we've done it before."

"I'd forgotten that you two went on a fake date. When was that?"

"Around the first of March, I believe," Peter said. "That was when Neal was worried Keller would make a move on Fiona."

"No such concerns, now," Neal said cheerfully. "As Sara reminds me far more often than necessary, she can kick butt far better than me."

Peter laughed. "Not your type."

"Maybe more Diana's." Neal said with a grin.

"Ouch."

Neal was prevented from casting further aspersions on Sara's desirability when the woman of the hour arrived—only twenty minutes late. She was wearing a plum-colored sheath dress.

Sara played her part to perfection. They sat at Henry's dining table which he piled high with chicken tandoori, beef vindaloo, samosas and all the sides. Sara and Neal both liked Indian food. Neal wasn't sure about Peter, but he proved himself up to the task.

While they ate they discussed Sara's role. It was her first opportunity to discuss it with them.

"I've been reviewing options on how to play it," she said. "I'd prefer not to portray yet one more woman smitten by Neal's charms. I have something much more devious in mind. We know that Kramer had Neal listed as a Person of Interest with Sterling-Bosch. Peter, I realize you talked with Mr. Bosch to remove Neal's name from the file, but suppose you didn't."

Peter nodded slowly as he chewed on a piece of naan. Swallowing, he said, "I like it. Kramer doesn't know that I've been working closely with Bosch on Ydrus cases. He has no reason to suspect that Neal's been delisted."

"I checked with Mr. Bosch. He hasn't heard from Kramer for several months. He's prepared to support my story that I've been assigned to investigate Neal. Sterling-Bosch believes he's working for Ydrus. Since I already know Neal, I'm the perfect choice."
Neal smirked. "You're going to use your feminine wiles on me, are you?"

"Absolutely," she said complacently. "You've been pining for me ever since that steamy date at Win-Win last summer."

"Which steamy date was that?" Henry demanded.

"That was our brief but torrid affair on the Fourth of July," Neal said, more than happy to relate the details. Henry was playing to his strength. "I disguised myself to look like you in order to get inside Win-Win's headquarters in Baltimore. You'd gone off grid. No one knew where you were. Desperate times." Neal turned to Sara. "Actually, to be accurate, you had the passionate date with Henry, not me."

"And they're both teasing you," Peter interrupted. "It was another fake date. The steam was added for the guard's benefit. At least, that's what Neal told me."

"And he's right," Neal said smugly. "Fake dates are our specialty." He turned to face Sara. "So you intend to seduce me?"

She placed her arms on the table and leaned forward provocatively, allowing Neal to appreciate her cleavage. "That's right. I don't trust you one bit. I know all about your criminal past. You're a menace to society and I'm determined to find out what your new scheme is."

He crossed his arms on the table and leaned forward as well. "But I, being an expert on cons, realize you're trying to play me."

"He will come to me for advice," Henry added, "as he always does, recognizing my superior wisdom and insight. I'll recommend he act smitten in order to gain access to Sterling-Bosch's list of clients. They're a valuable resource of potential buyers for the art."

Peter sat back and smiled. "Mozzie will approve. Keep your friends close and your enemies closer. Very Machiavellian."

"Mozzie and I have compared notes on our mutual Machiavellian tendencies," Henry acknowledged. "That generally boils down to which takeout is better for plotting," Neal explained to Sara. "Mozzie claims Chinese is preferable as an homage to Sun Tzu."

"Whereas the astute Machiavellian chooses the intricate spices of Indian cuisine to mimic the complexities of superior con maneuvers."

Peter stood up with a chuckle. "I'm getting another beer. You realize that's the only ingredient which is truly necessary. Anyone else ready?"

He supplied an extra beer to Henry the Puppetmaster. Sara was drinking wine with Neal, claiming it was part of her charm offensive.

When Peter resumed his seat, he said, "So now you have Sara acting as a spy for Sterling-Bosch while Neal is trying to play her."

"She won't be able to resist me," Neal said, "and despite her best intentions, she falls prey to my animal magnetism."

She frowned. "I thought it was going to be the other way around."
"No, it has to be this way if you're going to play the part of the jilted lover," Neal insisted.

"I didn't hear that part," Henry complained. "When have you two been scheming?"

"This was actually Travis's suggestion," Peter said, unwittingly providing a save. Neal didn't want Henry to suspect he and Sara were meeting privately.

"We'll make it appear that Kate has come to town as Adler's agent," Peter explained. "Since we're planting the idea that you've gone into partnership with him, it's likely he'd send someone to monitor you."

Henry smirked. "Our reputations precede us."

Peter took a swig of beer. "Exactly. Adler's agreed to finance the salvage operation. He'll demand verification."

"Of course Kate will want to hook up with me," Neal said. "She never could resist me. Unfortunately, Sara will catch us in the act. She'll be so upset that she'll go to Hughes and spill the beans about what you and I've been up to."

"All the while, Jones will act as Hughes's eyes and ears," Peter said. "He'll report on how I've been played by you two. We've accumulated quite a list of salacious details to provide. One of them is photos of Neal and Kate together."

"And who, pray tell, is playing the role of Kate?" Henry turned to face Sara. Neal kept his smile to himself. Henry had immediately spotted the potential.

"That will be me," she confirmed. "Richard already has photos of Kate and is preparing a prosthetic mask for me to wear."

Henry broke into a chuckle. "So you get to play two women seduced by Neal?"

"How lucky can one girl get?" she said, shrugging happily.

"The pleasure will be all mine," Neal said. "And the best part is that Sara and I can act these parts without worrying about our emotions getting in the way."

"Otherwise, it would be incredibly messy," Sara said, nodding in agreement. "As it is, I know that when the playacting is done I have Matthew to return to. This is all smoke and mirrors. Matthew is real. He provides the solidity and strength I need." She paused to smile at Neal as if to lessen the sting. "He's no capricious harlequin."

"And that's such a relief for me," Neal said. "The world is mine to enjoy. No entanglements, no commitments. Just the way I like it."

Had they overplayed it? Neal didn't think so. Henry was puzzled but Sara had played her part well. She seemed completely sincere when she talked about Matthew, even adopting a genuine softness to her expression. And only Neal knew that she was talking about him.

He was glad he hadn't told Henry about Astrena yet. Peter had known for a few weeks. He'd been able to adjust and was going along with Neal's desire not to bring it up. Would Henry be able to or would he haul Neal to a shrink? The more time passed with Neal not experiencing any symptoms, the crazier the notion sounded.

The best way to fight a goddess very likely was to ignore her. If you don't believe in her, she doesn't
exist and can't harm you. Was that why he dreaded telling Henry? He wouldn't be able to leave it alone and then neither could Neal. For now, Neal locked Astrena in the dungeon of supernatural secrets. Tomorrow would be the speakeasy party, and she was not invited.

The next day, Neal left work early to help June prepare. Bianka had texted him in the afternoon, hoping he'd be free to go to a concert with her on Saturday night. He called her from the loft to convey his regrets. This weekend he'd be diving for a U-boat.

Mozzie arrived as Neal was setting out lava lamps around the wet bar in the living room. As if to proclaim his newly arrived status from Rome, Mozzie was wearing a wide-brimmed Italian hat and silk scarf around his neck.

"Did you enjoy your time at the Vatican?" Neal asked.

"Luchino sends his regards, and even better, his book!"

"He found a copy?" Neal asked, staggered. He'd refused to let himself get excited about Mozzie having any success. The book, called The Magical Properties of Orchids, had been written by an eighteenth century Japanese botanist, Ono Ranzan.

Mozzie nodded complacently. "Luchino is a genius at finding the impossible. I arrived in New York this morning and have already given it to Chloe. This edition contains the original Japanese text and an Italian translation made a few years later in the early nineteenth century. Chloe said with the help of an Italian dictionary she hopes to manage, and of course I will lend my services. We should have a potion whipped up for you in no time!"

Neal had less confidence than Mozzie that orchids could provide a solution, but who was he to knock any attempt? He used to stress over Mozzie experimenting with drugs. Now he was grateful for his skill. Chloe was fast becoming an expert on potions. Billy Feng, the owner of the Aloha Emporium and an orchid expert, had also offered his help. He and Mozzie were both fluent in Japanese. Perhaps they could find a cure before he and Sam ever developed symptoms.

"Yes, mon frère, it's been a red-letter day. We have the book for the cure, André sold the Braque, and best of all Luchino has agreed to help me search for an original manuscript of Dante's Divine Comedy. I know one must exist and I'm determined to own it!"

Only Mozzie could be more excited about a search for a likely non-existent manuscript than the news that André had received ten million euros for Neal's forgery of the Braque. The payment was made with a cashier's check and had already been deposited to the account Mozzie had set up for their transactions. The amounts Mozzie would skim off for payments to André, Isabelle, and himself would barely register. In addition, André had received confirmation that the buyer was Garrett Fowler. The fence who'd handled the transaction had identified him from a photo.

Peter and El arrived before Mozzie could expound at much greater length on Dante.

"How does it feel to be New York's newest millionaire?" El asked, greeting them.

"Surprisingly comfortable," Neal admitted happily. "I must be born to the role."

"Technically, I'm the millionaire, not Neal," Mozzie pointed out.

El faked a look of surprise. "I thought the Honey Baron of Manhattan was already one many times over."
"And need I remind the Honey Baron that the sum is actually earmarked with the Bureau seal," Peter added sternly. "I expect a full accounting."

"You should pattern your role as crew boss after Gordon Taylor," Mozzie chided. "You don't want any grumbles among your crew."

El left to deliver appetizers to June and her chef Emil in the kitchen, while Peter and Mozzie helped Neal set up the bar.

"John Hobhouse called me from London after you left," Peter said. "Marta Kolar escaped from prison in Amsterdam."

Marta and her husband Jacek were programmers who worked for the Mansfelds and presumably Ydrus as well. Last month she'd overseen the attempt to brainwash Neal through a virtual reality program. "In the fake memories she'd planted in my head, it was Klaus who broke me out of prison," Neal reminded them. "My money's on him having engineered the real thing."

Peter uncorked a bottle of Cabernet. "Dutch and European authorities, Interpol—they're all involved in the search. Jones has already contacted Win-Win to include her image in their facial recognition software."

"Did I hear Win-Win's name?" Henry asked, walking up. "Did something come up?"

"The rattler has returned to the python," Mozzie said, removing his hat and placing it on a shelf behind the bar. "It may be time for me to get out my deerstalker cap. You remember I warned you we were taking on the speckled band. It's now grown in size."

It took Henry only a moment to figure out the meaning to Mozzie's words. When Marta was arrested in Los Angeles, she was discovered to have a tattoo of a diamondback rattlesnake on her back. Last month Klaus had been photographed at Heathrow airport, accompanied by a woman. The photo revealed she had a tiny tattoo of a python on her right third finger. It was tempting to believe the woman was Python, but so far she'd been unidentified. Mozzie had borrowed a phrase from Sherlock Holmes to describe them.

Henry poured himself a beer from the keg. "I wish we knew where the serpents' nest is."

"Let's hope this con unearths it," Peter said, helping himself as well.

"We've unmasked Azathoth," Henry said. "It's time for Python to come out from behind the curtain, too." He called out to Diana who'd just entered the room. "Any snakes in Lovecraft?"

She strode over to the bar. "There is, actually. Yig is a snake god. He's called the father of snakes. Lovecraft co-wrote a story about it—The Curse of Yig."

Henry raised a brow. "Yig – Ydrus. They sound pretty close to me. Perhaps you should add a snake to one of your stories. See what kind of response you'd get."

Diana frowned. "We already have. It's a good thing I'm so good-natured. Another writer might be insulted to receive advice from someone who doesn't bother to read the stories."

Neal snickered. "Diana makes a good case. I should be offended, too. Here I am, starring in a series, and you're not interested in them."

Neal enjoyed watching Henry squirm out of that one. He knew full well that Henry was secretly devouring every page. Henry feigned disinterest to reduce suspicion he was involved in the
matchmaking gyrations, but Neal wasn't falling for that snake oil.

Diana perched on a bar stool. "Ruiz took me out to lunch again today."

"What was on the menu?" Neal asked, pouring her a glass of wine.

She gave an evil smile. "This was a delicious bit of gossip. I told him I'd overheard Travis complain to Jones that you planned to fake being sick so you could go sailing with your cousin next weekend."

Travis walked up and helped himself to a beer. "Did I hear my name?"

"Just reporting what a good source of information you are," she said.

"Happy to do my part. Peter, did Diana tell you what I heard from Richard?"

Peter smiled. "What did Neal do now?"

"He's been joking about being a pirate. Not that Richard finds anything wrong with that. He's proud of his own pirate blood."

"The maternal side of Richard's family claims they're descendants of that famous Creole pirate Jean Lafitte," Neal explained. "He plundered ships in the Gulf of Mexico during the early nineteenth century. Jean Lafitte was renowned as a handsome swashbuckler and a lover. He was a natural leader and expert gambler."

"Hmm. Sounds a lot like Neal and me," Henry commented. "I wonder if there's any Lafitte blood in the Caffreys."

Peter faked a surprisingly good frown. "As a conscientious agent, Travis, you must be worried about Neal's influence."

Travis nodded earnestly. "I am, and not just at the Bureau but also on Richard."

Pirates . . . Neal wondered if Richard had dreamed up the idea. It could have been Jones. His nephew Ethan liked to play pirates with Neal. But no matter who thought of it, Neal loved it. He and Henry were modern day pirates, about to set sail for buried treasure.

"I see that look in your eyes," Peter murmured. "Is that a Yo, Ho, Ho I hear?"

"You caught me," Neal admitted, giving him a pirate's sly wink. "I may have to switch my Cabernet for a bottle of rum."

Notes: Neal's still riding the high from Paris. His forgery sold for an incredible sum of money. The U-boat con is proceeding on track, and he's even managed to sneak in a pirate adventure. But as any experienced pirate knows, the high seas can be treacherous. Captain Jack Sparrow had Barbossa to contend with. Does Neal really want to follow in Sparrow's footsteps?

Next week, he and Sara put their con artistry to work when they travel to Cape May with Mozzie and Henry. Cape May is reputed to be the most haunted town in New Jersey. Given Henry's sensitivity to ghosts, is he nervous, or does Neal give him something even scarier to worry about? I hope you'll join me next week for Chapter 6: Operation Barbarossa.
For the blog this week I wrote about Neal and Henry trading places. The title of the post is "Calling All Matchmakers."

A few notes about the references in this chapter: Ono Ranzan is a historical figure, but the book Mozzie acquired is unknown to scholars. At the bistro Henry and El discuss scenes from Chapter 8 of Cinereous Skies.

Blog: Penna Nomen & Silbrith Conversation: www.pennasilbrithconversation.blogspot.com
Chapter Visuals and Music: The Harlequin's Shadow board on the Caffrey Conversation Pinterest website: www.pinterest.com/caffreycon

With the arrival of the last guests—Agent Tricia Wiese and Sara—the party began in earnest. June's chef Emil had planned the menu around a dinner June prepared to welcome Neal home in *Cinereous Skies*: shrimp étouffée, vegetarian jambalaya, and brandy Alexander pie for dessert. Henry had celebrated his birthday eleven days earlier while sailing with Eric, and Emil had outdone himself with a cake—a devil's food chocolate U-boat afloat in a blue ocean. It was hard to tell whether Henry, Jones, or Mozzie was more delighted. The excitement in the group was palpable. The U-boat con was weighing anchor.

Neal drifted among the guests, careful to pay only casual attention to Sara. They'd previously agreed for her to focus on Mozzie and Diana. He would have loved to sneak off with her for a continuation of that mouth-to-mouth resuscitation which had been so successful Tuesday night, but with Henry there, it was too risky.

After dinner, the well-fed crowd gathered in the music room for a command performance. The Arkham Round Table had asked for Neal to sing some of the selections from the story with a little help from his friends. At the top of the list was a duet he and June performed of "Bridge Over Troubled Water." It was a song of special significance, not only because of the part it played in the story, but because Peter had requested it be included. A bridge over a troubled river had been the symbolic lifeline he'd tossed Neal which allowed him to confess his theft of the Braque painting.

From bridges they moved to birds. "Blackbird" by the Beatles was a favorite of June's which Diana had woven into the story. After Neal performed it as a solo, he asked for any requests from the floor.

"Since you're singing about birds, how about 'Mockingbird'?” El asked. Neal grinned when he heard it. He knew someone would suggest it. A daring move to have it come from one of the matchmakers, but he and Sara were ready for them.

"My pleasure, but I'll need to have Sara join me. As you undoubtedly recall, that's a duet in the story."

"No way, Caffrey!” Sara interrupted with a laugh. "I hope no one makes the mistake of confusing me with Arkham Sara."


"If you'd read the story," Sara said, lifting a brow pointedly, "you'd know Sara has till New Year's to learn how to sing 'Mockingbird.' For me to sing it now would be a spoiler!"

"How about 'Hey Jude' instead," Neal suggested. "That was included in an earlier story."

"Excellent choice," El said. "You're our Arkham Paul McCartney."

Diana snorted. "You really don't want to feed his ego, do you?"

"Sure she does," Neal said and launched into a soulful rendition of "Hey Jones," muddling Jones's name for Jude and urging him to go after his on-and-off girlfriend Helen. Jones was breathing fire by the conclusion.

"What's the matter?” Neal mocked. "Can't take a hint? I thought you'd appreciate a clue or two."
was careful not to look at Sara when he used one of their code words.

"Yeah, right, Caffrey. You're the clueless one, not me," Jones retorted then turned to Diana. "How about giving Arkham Jones a girlfriend? Aren't your fans demanding it?"

"What do you think I'm running?" she complained. "The dating game?"

While they argued, Henry jumped up and turned on his electric guitar. He'd been fidgeting impatiently to sing ever since Neal started. He stoked the already excited flames by singing "Jumpin' Jack Flash" by the Rolling Stones. Jones even leaped up and danced with him. It was a classic moment that Neal was glad to see Travis was recording, but Henry's choice of music couldn't go unchallenged.

"You're not being true to canon," Neal pointed out, adopting Peter's stern look. "No Stones music has ever been mentioned in Arkham Files."

"Picky, picky. It's the same era. Besides bad-boy music is just what we need to kick this con into gear."

"Since Sara won't sing," Peter said, "how about you two smart-asses belting out a couple together?" Neal knew exactly what Peter was doing. By keeping Henry on stage, he hoped to prevent Neal from dragging him up.

And they were happy to go along with his request. After a quick argument which Neal naturally won, they did a rocking version of the Stones "Under My Thumb" with just a few amendments to the lyrics which had the entire group strutting. Soon Adler, Klaus, and Rolf would be under their thumbs.

At the end of the party, Henry stayed around to help clean up. Tomorrow they'd head to Cape May. Henry was renting a large SUV for the trip. It would be a lively carload with Neal, Sara, and Mozzie on board.

"What are you chuckling about?" Henry asked, returning from a trip to the kitchen to drop off a load of dirty glasses.

"Pirates," Neal said, cleaning the bar countertop with a rag. "That comment Travis made about Richard calling me a pirate got me thinking. We've been joking about Richard's pirate blood since last fall. This may be the time to rename the musketeers swashbuckling pirates."

"Good idea. Wasn't there a pair of pirate brothers?"

Neal nodded. "The Barbarossa brothers were two of the most notorious pirates in history. They sailed along the Barbary coast in North Africa."

Henry slung an arm around his neck. "Perfect. We've been looking for a code name to the con. I hereby dub it Operation Barbarossa. I, of course, will be the leader."

Neal raised a suspicious eyebrow. "I thought I was the one leading you astray."

"Nah, I had the head start."

"If you're going to be a pirate, you need to learn how to fence," Neal pointed out, ever a stickler for accuracy. "Your skill with the cutlass is non-existent."

"Don't need one. I'll use my blunderbuss instead," Henry asserted as he placed unopened wine
bottles in a box. "Speaking of blunders, I hope the Arkham Round Table didn't make one with Sara. Including her in the stories could make it awkward if you ever wanted to date her."

Addressing the issue forthrightly? *Clever smokescreen, bro, but I'm onto you.* "No worries," Neal dismissed. "I admit I was a little worried Sara would get the wrong idea, but she understands. She enjoys laughing over her counterpart. And now that she's so happy with her new object of fascination, Matthew, it makes it easier for both of us."

Henry nodded agreement, looking not in the least fazed. For a brief moment during the party, Neal had wavered in his resolve. Were he and Sara doing the right thing to keep their friends in the dark? Then Neal caught Henry give El a brief flick of a nod while Neal was chatting with Sara. That mischievous glint in El's eyes was something Neal hadn't seen in quite a while. Was the matchmaking conspiracy providing a measure of relief from the constant stress of worrying about the Mansfelds?

And he knew how much Henry was enjoying the challenge. A complicated puzzle to solve—a mind game to master—was the best birthday gift he could give to Henry. If it worked out, Neal could thank the matchmakers for their role, and if not, he'd never let on he knew what they'd been up to.

**WCWCW**

Peter had told the team he'd overlook any late arrivals the next day at work. He chalked up last night's party as a team-building exercise which by rights should have been done during work hours. It was also a chance to reinforce his image of a permissive boss. He tried not to think about what it would be like to enforce discipline after the con was concluded.

Neal took full advantage of the excuse. He breezed in at close to ten, and as they'd previously agreed, stopped off at twelve to see Peter, complaining of a headache. Ever the indulgent boss, Peter ordered him home to rest while privately wishing he could go to Cape May with him. Those infamous pirates Neal and Henry were casting anchor to search for a U-boat. Operation Barbarossa had moved to the next stage.

When Hughes appeared at his doorway, Peter shook off thoughts of himself as Captain Peter Sparrow.

"I just got off the phone with Kramer," Hughes said, his craggy face relaxing into an unheard-of smirk. Hughes prided himself on maintaining a stern countenance. Peter suspected he deliberately overplayed it as part of the Hughes management technique. At the moment the typically grim-faced special agent in charge had the wicked grin of a schoolboy.

"How'd it go?" Peter asked.

Hughes closed the door and pulled up the side chair to sit opposite him. "It's a sad spectacle," he said, shaking his head regretfully, "to witness the downward spiral of what I used to consider was one of the most promising agents in New York. It's gotten to the point that extreme measures are called for before you irrevocably damage your career. Kramer is your former mentor. I hope he'll be willing to assist my last-ditch effort."

"When did this unfortunate decline begin?" Peter asked, imagining how Kramer would have reacted.

"The warning signs were there from the first day Caffrey showed up. I stroked Kramer's ego by praising him for his warning. He'd cautioned me about future issues and he was right."

"He must have been gratified to hear your acknowledgment."
"He was the voice of commiseration and sympathy," Hughes acknowledged. "I reviewed some of
the early warning signs—the favoritism you exhibited, the complaints about Caffrey that the team
members made, the number of times he's engaged in suspicious behavior."

Peter chuckled. "You could have gone on for an hour about that."

"I restricted myself to a few of the most glaring incidents. That murky business with the diamond
earrings last fall—I still don't know how he wiggled out of that one. His association with known
criminals like Keller. I didn't need to supply many examples. Kramer was already aware of Caffrey's
record and helpfully added a couple to my list."

"Which ones?"

"He had the gall to bring up the theft of the Raphael last summer and how he still suspects Caffrey
was involved." Hughes snorted as he crossed his arms. "He wants to bring up the very painting we
can now use to nail him. It gave me immense satisfaction to know every detail of our conversation
was being recorded."

"And when did the alarm bells about my reprehensible behavior kick into high gear?"

Hughes stroked his chin for a moment. "That would have to be at the end of July when you
fabricated a patently false tale about how you and Neal needed to research identity fraud in D.C. If it
had been just you, I would have accepted it, although Jones is the one with primary responsibility.
But taking Caffrey along? That reeked of dead fish from a mile away."

Peter chuckled appreciatively. Hughes hadn't told him he planned to make use of that trip but it was a
smart move. Peter had thought at the time it would have multiple benefits. Neal was concerned about
his cousin Angela. He was just off medical leave and Peter was concerned that he wasn't ready for
field work. They'd both gone down to investigate what were genuine cases of fraud, little suspecting
that they'd also uncover a vampires' nest. Peter was glad he'd made a full accounting to Hughes
afterward. It still surprised him that Hughes didn't give him a harder time over it, although he was
sure Hughes didn't fully believe him. Apparently nothing Neal could get mired in surprised Hughes
anymore.

"I ordered Jones to check into it and his report confirmed my suspicions." Hughes paused to shake
his head in disapproval even as his eyes twinkled. "Staying at a historic inn in a college town when
you could have selected a perfectly reasonable hotel for much less in D.C.? What were you thinking?
Trying to recapture your college youth? You probably spent the entire trip going to beer parties with
Caffrey and his friends. From that point on, I knew Caffrey had you in his back pocket."

Neal would be proud of Hughes's performance. Kramer would undoubtedly check the story out, and
everything Hughes said was true with witnesses who could confirm it.

"At that point I called on Jones to be my eyes and ears. He placed a bug on your office phone while
you were in Paris on a weekend getaway."

Peter grinned. "Did you enjoy the call I had with Joe?"

Hughes chuckled. "It was golden. Convey my compliments to your brother. I've already sent the
recording to Kramer. Joe's description of how Neal was leading Henry astray had just the right
overtone of anguish. And that Henry being kidnapped by Adler in Argentina was all Neal's fault?
That was masterful."

"And his wife Noelle's voice in the background, adding her complaints?"
"Her voice was louder at times than his. It was high drama, but I give the Oscar to you for your heart-rendering account of how Henry was to blame. The way your voice broke when you bemoaned how blind Joe was to Henry's faults." Hughes added in a surprisingly decent imitation of Peter's voice, "Henry's on probation at Win-Win. He came back in disgrace from Argentina. Took off sailing for two weeks without informing anyone. Didn't even tell his grandfather he was borrowing his boat." Hughes shook his head with disapproval. "It's fortunate you were speaking on the phone. If Joe had been in the office, you might have come to blows. Kramer was properly sympathetic to my outrage at how Henry and Neal were causing such dissension within your family."

"This is outstanding. Kramer can now pass on to Ydrus that Henry's linked to Adler. They already know Neal used to work for him."

"Do you expect Ydrus knows that Fowler bought Neal's forgery?" Hughes asked.

"We assume so. That Neal obtained such a high black-market price must have caused seismic waves in the underworld. Kramer would have informed Ydrus that Fowler works for Adler. Travis is using the program Aidan wrote to monitor Kramer's private email correspondence. Win-Win is handling any cell phone calls he makes, but so far no additional incriminating information has come in. Kramer's likely using a burner phone."

Hughes grunted acknowledgment. "That was a lucky fluke Travis was able to snag Kramer's email to Python. Any progress on tracing Ydrus's location?"

"Not from the files on the computer. There were so many rerouting addresses and firewalls, Travis's team hasn't been able to crack through. How'd you leave it with Kramer?"

"He promised to reach out to you."

"I'm looking forward to it, but I won't hold my breath. He could play it either way. Will he pretend to be my friend or be content to watch me go up in flames?"

"I'd like to know the answer to that as well," Hughes said as he stood up. "I'm sorry I couldn't attend the party last night. Ilsa and I both would have enjoyed it, but now is not the time to commit any errors."

They had decided it would be too risky for Hughes and his wife to attend. They assumed Neal and Peter were being monitored by Ydrus agents. A party of the Arkham Round Table was already a known event, but Hughes had never participated. If he were to be spotted visiting June's mansion, it could raise a red flag.

Jones stopped by to see Peter shortly after Hughes left.

"I'm taking off. Neal gave me a detailed schedule. Easiest tailing assignment I'll ever have," he acknowledged with a grin.

Jones would ostensibly be monitoring Neal and Henry's activities in Cape May through the GPS device he'd inserted into Neal's cell phone.

"You'll have a lot of time to cool your heels while they're sailing. Any plans?"

"I've packed my trunks. Gonna lie on the beach. Taking some files along in case I get bored. Helen's coming down on Saturday." Jones paused and added with a straight face, "She'll make a great cover."
Neal felt like he was on permanent vacation. The previous weekend he'd been in Paris and now Cape May. And it was all on expense account . . . Vincent Adler's expense account.

They were using funds from the Braque sale to finance their weekend getaway and had arrived at the seaside resort midafternoon. The elaborate Victorian houses, painted in bright colors, carried gingerbread decorations to new heights. They were staying overnight at the Inn of Cape May, a sprawling Victorian structure built in the 1890s.

The town had another claim to fame which Neal planned to surprise Henry with over dinner. He'd arranged for a belated birthday party that night which would also be charged to the account so generously provided by Adler. After keeping Henry a prisoner in deplorable conditions in his Argentina hideout, Neal knew that Vincent would want to make amends.

Once they dropped their bags off in their rooms, Henry and Mozzie left to buy provisions for the sailboat. The Executive Decision was already in place at the marina. Henry had sailed it up from its berth in Baltimore earlier in the week.

Neal and Sara's assignment was especially onerous. They were to spend the afternoon shopping while Jones snapped surveillance photos of them.

Neal had worked out the schedule with him the previous day. The irony wasn't lost on either of them. When Neal started at the FBI, the agents were suspicious of having a thief in their midst. Peter shared their concerns and had tasked Jones with keeping an eye on him. It had taken over six months for Neal to uncover the extent to which he'd been monitored, and the news had come as a blow. Peter had been upfront in acknowledging he'd gone overboard. The fact that he'd been partially motivated by a desire to keep Neal safe from his former criminal associates helped to ease the sting. Neal and Jones had sorted out the awkwardness a long time ago, and it was now poetic justice that Jones could perform the same assignment as part of a con.

When Jones texted he was in position, Neal and Sara sauntered out of the hotel, hand in hand.

"What would you like to shop for?" Sara asked.

"How about diamonds?" he asked. "I know how you like anything sparkly." He'd given Sara the alias of Tiffany Case, a Bond girl who also liked diamonds long before he knew of Sara's own fondness for jewelry.

Her eyes widened as a bright smile broke out. "Diamonds already? And after only one date? I like your style."

"Don't get too excited," he cautioned. "They're fake—just like this date."

"Spoilsport!" She tightened her grip on his hand. "Just what kind of fake diamonds do you have in mind?"

"Have you ever heard of Cape May Diamonds?"

"Are they a type of sea glass?"

"No, they're actual quartz pebbles which have been washed down from the Delaware River. Beachcombers find them on local beaches. The Native Americans used to trade them."

At a jewelry shop, Neal picked out a silver and "diamond" necklace for Sara. "This should make a good photo," he murmured in her ear as he fastened it around her neck.
"Do you see Jones?" she whispered back, giving him a kiss.

"He's standing outside the shop." Neal pulled out his phone and texted him: *U should buy a Cape May diamond 4 Helen.*

That night Sara wore her necklace to dinner. Neal had made reservations at the Peter Shields Inn for the surprise birthday party. Henry was grumpy that the reservations were so late, but Neal insisted that the ambiance wouldn't be right unless it was dark.

As arranged, the maître d' seated their group at a secluded table overlooking the water. Neal and Sara went local with oysters to start and scallops for their main course with a Pinot Grigio from Turdo Vineyards. The birthday boy settled for filet mignon and beer. Mozzie, ever the gourmet, after a prolonged discussion with the chef settled on Hudson Valley foie gras followed by halibut. Chocolate lava cake was on order for dessert.

Neal originally planned to wait till after the appetizers had been served before springing his surprise, but Henry couldn't wait.

"When will the ghost appear in the dining room?" he asked nonchalantly. "How scared would you like me to act?"

"What are you talking about?" Neal asked.

Henry snorted, dismissing Neal's innocent act with a wave of his hand. "I've been onto your scheme for weeks."

"Will somebody please clue me in?" Sara asked.

"Ghosts," Henry said, as if that explained everything. He turned to Mozzie. "You might as well confess, too. That's why you took hours discussing how to properly select arugula. Your role was to keep me occupied so Neal could arrange the special effects."

Mozzie shrugged, not doing anything to puncture the balloon Henry was so gleefully inflating.

Reaching into his jacket pocket, Henry pulled out a brochure and waved it in front of them. "I picked this up in the lobby of our inn—the *Ghosts of Cape May Trolley Tour.* Is this what gave you the inspiration?"

Neal smiled and shook his head.

"Still not willing to confess? You might as well go ahead and start the show, and thank you."

"What for?" Neal asked, happy to play along.

"For devising this little mystery for me. It wasn't as intricate as I expected, but it was a good joke. I researched the location when Jones selected it as the site for the U-boat. Cape May boasts of being the most haunted town in New Jersey. Then, when you suggested the inn, I checked on it too. I'm sure you're not surprised to hear it's a prime spot for ghost sightings." Henry paused to take a breath. "And if I hadn't already guessed, I certainly would have with your choice of restaurant. You've laid all your cards face up now."

"I was particularly pleased by the selection," Mozzie said. "The Peter Shields Inn is considered to be the nexus of paranormal activity for the region. I brought along my EMF meter and plan to use it while conducting a post-dinner saunter through the passageways."
Neal clapped his hand to his mouth. "I forgot the ectoplasm!"

Mozzie grinned maniacally. "I didn't!"

Sara turned to Mr. Know-it-all. "Do I detect a certain sensitivity to ghosts?"

Henry nodded, raising his hand. "That's me and I freely admit it, unlike certain people sitting at the table who love to keep secrets. Last April Fool's Day, Neal, Mozzie, and Angela tried to prank me by tricking me into believing June's house was haunted. Naturally, I saw through their scheme right away."

"Not exactly. We had you going for at least a couple of days," Neal reminded him. "Is it purely a coincidence that you haven't stayed at June's place since?" When Henry didn't immediately reply, Neal added with satisfaction, "I rest my case."

"So what will it be this time? Are we taking the late night trolley tour of the haunted mansions?"

"That does sound delightful," Sara said, "but you have nothing to fear. I'll be there to hold your hand. I ain't 'fraid of no ghosts."

"And you have no need to in Cape May," Mozzie said. "The local spirits are with only a few exceptions quite harmless."

Neal waited till the entrées were served before revealing his surprise. Henry was deriving so much enjoyment out of the mistaken belief that he'd busted Neal's ghostly plan, Neal didn't have the heart to tell him he was wrong. This was supposed to be a birthday celebration, and Henry was definitely riding high.

Mozzie primed the pump by describing in dramatic fashion some of the more famous ghosts in Cape May.

Neal wished he could have included Jones in the birthday party, but they couldn't take a chance. They knew agents of Ydrus were monitoring their movements. Adler could have operatives there as well. But Neal had done the next best thing. Jones was having dinner in one of the other dining areas and was able to listen in to the conversation through a feed from Neal's phone. Jones treated ghost stories with a healthy respect he'd acquired from hearing tales in the Navy. He would be the last person to give Henry grief over his beliefs.

Neal ordered another beer for Henry to have with his steak and an additional bottle of wine for the rest of them. The moment of truth had come. "I'm glad you enjoyed the ghost stories so much, particularly since that was not planned for tonight's agenda."

Henry managed a chuckle as he chewed. Swallowing, he added, "I'm prepared to be magnanimous. The beef is superb. Have it your way. What is on the agenda, pray tell?"

"Something far more exciting," Sara said, her eyes dancing.

"It couldn't have anything to do with that necklace you're wearing? Do you and Neal have anything to reveal?"

"Hardly!" She glanced at Neal and fingered the pendant. "But it is lovely— a Cape May diamond my con artist mark bought me this afternoon." She faked a breathy sigh. "I know I should be focused on discovering Neal's secrets. I am, after all, a conscientious investigator. But I feel myself unaccountably attracted to him despite my efforts." When Neal raised a seductive eyebrow and gave her one of his patented-to-raise-steam looks, she added with another sigh. "I must like bad boys."
Then she switched off the effect. "This diamond's fake just like our romance, but it's good fun. I regretted not growing up with brothers. Now I feel like I have three."

Mozzie sniggered to be included as one of the brothers, but quickly demanded Neal present Henry with his present.

Neal cleared his throat, pausing for a dramatic second. "We've already given you a mystery to solve. There can be only one gift left. Yes, Henry Winslow, we intend to satisfy your secret desire by giving you the lead role in a movie!"

They got him. Henry sat back in gobsmacked amazement, reinforced by the excessively long buildup. He'd been bitten by the acting bug ever since he was a kid, a natural occurrence since as a child he'd hung around his grandmother Irene, a famous actress. Neal might have as well if that tie hadn't been severed when he went into WITSEC. Henry's nascent ability was quashed by his father who was intent on Henry following his footsteps at Win-Win.

To sweeten the gift, Neal added an additional confession. "Your assumption wasn't that far off the mark. I'd originally thought of producing a film noir in the mold of the *Blair Witch Project.*"

"Cape May would have made an ideal setting," Sara said. "The houses are so atmospheric. They exude horror."

"We would have filmed it at night," Mozzie added. "I, of course, would be director as well as scriptwriter. The project was already well in hand—"

"When I came up with an even better idea," Neal interjected firmly before Mozzie took credit. "The subject will be the theft of a U-boat during World War II. The heist was carried off by a daring band of American spies working undercover. All of us have roles to play, but you'll be the lead actor."

"U-boat . . ." Henry considered, a smile breaking out. "You're planning the movie as part of the con!"

Neal nodded. "It's just the sort of outrageous stunt two pirates would pull. Not only salvage the U-boat but boast about it."

"And you won't even notice when I steal a copy of some of the footage to use as further evidence of your crime," Sara added.

"Aidan will film it. He needs to make a short feature for his film course and is eager to get a head start."

"Isn't he responsible for writing the script?" Henry asked.

"Not this time," Neal said. "His assignment is to demonstrate a mastery of camera angles and film composition. Students are allowed to draw upon others for the script, music, sets, etc."

"Naturally, Aidan was overcome with gratitude when I offered my expertise," Mozzie said complacently. "We were a superb team for the yellow-faced bee video. We'll be able to build on its success."

"The film will be wonderful," Sara predicted. "Aidan may want to enter it into the LA Shorts Fest —"

Henry chuckled. " Aren't you being a little over-optimistic?"
She shook her head. "I don't think so. You're Neal's cousin. You have acting in your blood. I can vouch for Neal's acting ability. And I could fool anyone that I'm crushing on Neal. With the magnificent script Mozzie will write —she placed a hand on Mozzie's arm and smiled at him—"the sky's the limit."

"The Blair Witch Project began as a student project," Mozzie noted. "I've always found it best to dream big. There's plenty of time later to scale back if necessary."

Henry didn't realize that there was one more surprise in store for him. When they returned to the hotel, Neal planned to tell him that the shadow world of monsters Henry only half-believed in were real. Telling Sara about Astrena's hold on him had been difficult enough and Neal didn't have the emotional history with her that he did with Henry.

On their way back to the hotel, they took a leisurely walk along Beach Avenue with Mozzie serving as tour guide for the ghosts of Cape May. He had them pause at the Hotel Macomber while he told dark tales of the "trunk lady." Henry took the stories in good spirits. Neal found himself listening to the stories with a new appreciation. How many of them were true? What would Dean and Sam say about them?

Jones followed their group at a discreet distance, providing a ready excuse for Neal to walk close to Sara. The sound of the ocean waves lapping onto the shoreline was relaxing. It would have been so easy to put off telling Henry for another day. Wouldn't that be better? This was a belated birthday celebration. Hearing Neal's news could easily ruin it for Henry.

Mozzie had them stop along the beach to look at the lighthouse in the distance. There was something eerie about its lonely position on the shore. While their paranormal expert told Henry about the ghosts who were rumored to haunt it, Neal tore his eyes away to gaze back over the ocean.

Sara murmured in his ear, "It won't be as difficult as you think."

"I shouldn't have waited this long. He'll be hurt . . . upset."

"Not as much as he'd be if you delay it further. And he'll be grateful you told him."

When they arrived at the hotel, Mozzie announced his intention to check the hallways with his EMF meter.

"Let me know if you find anything," Sara said. "I'll be in my room, curled up with Chloe's latest novel, Mandrake's Kiss."

"Excellent choice!" Mozzie said. "Janet and I think it's her best one yet. You'll particularly enjoy Chapter 15. Dean must have written part of it."

Sara grinned. "Steamy, huh?"

"Who's Chloe?" Henry asked, "and should I know who Dean is?"

"I'll explain in my room," Neal offered. Had Sara mentioned the book to get him over that first hurdle? He appreciated the lift.

Once in his room, Neal moved the wicker chairs in front of the bay window so they could look out on the ocean. It was almost like being outside.

"Nice," Henry commented, sprawling into one of the chairs. "It's almost as peaceful as being on the ocean."
Neal sat beside him. "I have one more present for you, although you may want to give it back. It's something you constantly seek, but rarely acquire."

Henry nodded, not looking at him. "One of those secrets you keep buried away? The one you've been stressing about on the way back to the hotel?"

Neal took a breath. "It's been going on a lot longer than that."

"How much longer?"

"Four months."

Henry didn't say anything for a minute. Neal watched his lips clamping down on what was likely his immediate reaction—a curse that Neal hadn't told him earlier. "Does this have anything to do with Klaus or Adler?"

"No, but it is work related, at least in Peter's eyes."

"Am I the last to know?"

Neal winced. "I haven't told any of the other relatives. I only found out about the full extent a couple of weeks ago. You were gone. Then we were in Paris. I didn't want to wreck the party . . ." He swiped a nervous hand through his hair. No wonder he kept secrets. Why should he put Henry through this? There'd be plenty of time once he came down with symptoms, and that could be years away.

"How bad is it?"

"Unknown," Neal admitted.

Now it was Henry's time to take a slow breath. "Then you better fill me in."

"It started in April with a trip to a swamp about an hour's drive west of here." As Neal told him about being kidnapped by vampires, being nearly set up in flames by a witch, and then his truly unfortunate encounter with a pure-blood vampire a few weeks ago, Henry stared at him in shock. It was so much worse than with Sara. She hadn't expected him to tell her what was going on. Henry did. And reliving every incident brought back all the associated terrors. Neal would have jumped up and paced to get through it, but he was determined not to let Henry know how freaked out he was about it. Henry would go into five-star protector mode, but that wouldn't help anything.

"Since the last time Astrena was inside my head, I haven't experienced anything unusual. When the psychic link was detected, I didn't sense anything strange except a headache." Neal waited uneasily for Henry's reaction. Would he vent his anger that Neal had kept it a secret for so long? Order him to a shrink because he was delusional?

"Well, that sucks." Henry's quiet comment acted as a muscle relaxant. All the tension which had been compressing Neal's lungs into tiny pinched bags since he left the restaurant relaxed its grip and he was able to breathe again.

"Yeah, not what I'd planned."

"You must be having nightmares about it."

Neal shrugged. No point in denying it. Henry knew him too well.
"You say you're not experiencing any effects. Are you sure the link exists?"

"If it were just me, I wouldn't believe it. But I saw that blue jet of gas coming out of the back of Sam's head when the psychic made the link visible. Sam and I are on each other's speed dials. A month ago, he was experiencing some issues which could be related, but he's fine now."

"And there's no way to sever the link unless some sort of potion or counterspell is found?"

"Pretty much. My current theory is that Astrena will come to her senses and realize my art isn't up to her standards."

"What do Dean and Sam say to that?"

"I haven't told them," Neal admitted, "but I doubt they'd agree. You gotta understand, when we had our first run-in with the supernatural, the only person Peter told was El. Dean warned us no one would believe us, and we didn't expect anything similar to ever happen again."

"And now you and Sam had been targeted."

Neal nodded. "Peter insisted that all the con participants be made aware of it. Mozzie and Sara know, as does El."

"I need to meet the Winchesters. What are they like?"

"Dean could pass himself off as you."

"Seriously?"

"See for yourself." Neal scrolled through the photos on his phone and passed it to Henry. "I took these of him when he sang at Riffs a couple of weekends ago."

Henry did a double-take when he saw the photo. "That's Dean?"

"If you wore his clothes, restyled your hair, and imitated his mannerisms, you could trade places a lot easier than we can."

"I've heard it said everyone on Earth has a double walking around somewhere. Guess I've found mine. And he sings, too? Did the crowd think he was me?"

"No. His singing style is quite different. He's not as good on the guitar, and he prefers classic rock."

Neal knew what Henry was doing—changing the subject so they could both get hold of their emotions.

"Peter's okay with you participating in the con?"

"Yeah. Christie's given me a thorough exam and can find nothing wrong. I've told Peter I'll let him know if anything comes up. Until then he's agreed not to make an issue of it."

"And you want me to do the same." He nodded slowly. "I can do that, and . . . I get why you didn't tell me at first."

"I'm glad you know now." And he meant it. Henry was handling it much better than he'd feared. "You must feel vindicated. Some ghosts are real."

He grunted acknowledgment. "I didn't realize they were simply the tip of the iceberg. You know that
if there's anything I can do to help—even it's just to be a punching bag—I'm here for you."

"I do, and I have your first assignment ready. We're kicking all thoughts of Astrena overboard. How often do we get the chance to be pirates?"

Henry chuckled. "We're long overdue, and I run a taut ship. You won't have to worry about any stowaways. Now, tell me more about this movie I'm starring in."

Neal knew that wasn't their last discussion about Astrena, but he appreciated Henry switching topics. They both needed to stop thinking about her if they were to get any sleep. Before calling it a night, they stayed up late, dreaming up crazy adventures for Mozzie's script which would never be used. Neal felt more relaxed than he had in a long time. Maintaining that quarantine wall had come at a cost. It could now be dismantled and moved into storage. With the support he had around him, that soul-sucking goddess didn't stand a chance.

Notes: Henry started off the evening, thinking he'd unmasked a plot to prank him. Instead he learned that not only were ghosts real but there were other monsters who posed a greater threat. Now he's in a difficult spot. Neal wants to nail the lid closed on everything concerning the curse, but that won't be easy for either him or Henry to do. Next week in Chapter 7: A Pirate's Life, Kramer talks with Peter and El while Neal and his friends are on the high seas. We also drop in on Kate and Adler.

The account of how Peter directed Jones to spy on Neal is in Choirboy Caffrey. That was when Neal had just begun working at the FBI. Peter came clean about the operation in Caffrey Disclosure. Trust in those early days was a big issue. Running a con like the present one would have been unthinkable. Now the team can joke about the spying they're doing on each other. In addition to spying, there are several psychological games going on. I've written about them for the blog. The post is called "Gamesmanship."

I scattered references to several other stories in this chapter. The April Fool's Day prank was the subject of Penna's vignette: April Fool. The trip Peter and Neal took to D.C. ostensibly to research identity fraud was covered in my story Dark Rabbit.

Many thanks to Penna for her help with the conversation between Henry and Neal. Discussing how Neal and Henry would approach it made for a fascinating round of bunnyball.

Blog: Penna Nomen & Silbrith Conversation: www.pennasilbrithconversation.blogspot.com
Chapter Visuals and Music: The Harlequin's Shadow board on the Caffrey Conversation Pinterest website: www.pinterest.com/caffreycon
New pins include the songs mentioned in the chapter, Cape May locations, Sara's "diamond" necklace, and that delicious U-boat cake.
Cape May. Saturday, August 20, 2005.

Bright and early on Saturday morning, Neal and his fellow pirates weighed anchor. Sara unfurled a small Jolly Roger she'd brought along for the adventure and tied it to the rigging. Neal caught a glimpse of Jones lurking on the dock and hoped he got a photo.

Graham had named his sailboat the *Executive Decision*, but that was hardly an appropriate name for a pirate ship. Captain Jack Sparrow sailed on the *Black Pearl*. Their vessel would henceforth be known as the *Black Diamond*. The location Henry had picked was about thirty miles from land, far enough to be undisturbed. Cape May was a popular spot for divers, with an artificial reef and several famous wrecks closer to shore.

They'd left a paper trail for any Adler or Ydrus agent to find. Henry had loaded the boat with diving gear in Baltimore. He'd been able to rent a small compressor to fill their tanks so they didn't need to bring as many with them. If any spy satellite was taking photos, their adversaries were meant to think they were verifying the location of the U-boat.

Mozzie had supplied several pieces of abstruse equipment with sonar displays, not that they believed an Adler agent would launch a covert attack and board the sailboat. But Mozzie was a firm believer in full and complete immersion. *Live the con. Be the con.*

Henry was the expert scuba diver of the group. He'd been diving since he was a kid. Sara had taken a course in college, and Neal had picked it up in Geneva, Switzerland. Back then, he and Klaus had planned fantasy heists using James Bond submarine cars. Diving for a U-boat hadn't crossed their minds.

They spent the afternoon scuba diving in the waters off Cape May. There were no subs but plenty of underwater life to admire. The best sight of all was Sara in her sleek turquoise and black wetsuit. When he held out his hand to help her climb back into the boat after their last dive, he felt like James Bond with his leading lady.

"Not bad, team," Henry said, stripping off his wetsuit. "I'm already living that movie. Did anyone see *Sphere*, the movie adaptation of Michael Crichton's novel? After our U-boat adventure, perhaps our next one should be a sci-fi epic."

"Or a remake of *Thunderball*," Neal suggested. "Of course, I'll be James Bond. You can play my CIA protector, Felix Leiter." He eyed Sara, who had unzipped her suit to reveal a bikini underneath. The fringe benefits this con provided . . . "Sara, you'd make a stunning Domino."

She made a face. "I don't want to be just another Bond girl. Give me a part with brains, like Mary Elizabeth Mastrantonio's part in *The Abyss*."

"If you're done playing movie trivia," Mozzie interrupted impatiently, "I have news of a more timely nature." He clamped a hand onto his straw hat to keep it from being blown off by a wind gust and retreated to the shade provided by one of the sails. "We should move inside. I sunburn easily."

"Let me guess," Henry said. "You finished the script? Deciphered the fractal code?"

Mozzie frowned. "Do you have no concept of time? The reason everything doesn't happen at once?"

Whenever Mozzie was quoting Einstein, he was in a good mood. And he didn't take long to explain
"Isabelle met with Huber. She spun quite a tale, claiming that Neal visited her and asked about fractal equations. She agreed to help him after negotiating a satisfactory reimbursement. Huber took the hint and offered to pay her as well, but he was not a pushover. He demanded evidence that she knew what she was talking about."

Was he still calling himself Dimitris?" Sara asked, grabbing a towel to dry her hair.

"Yes, but not for long. Isabelle showed him a photo of herself with Huber's father."

"I didn't know she had one," Neal said.

"André didn't either." Mozzie sighed and kissed the tips of his fingers. "What a grande dame she is! The photo had been taken at the nightclub in Paris where she worked. I gather Huber was looking very happy with her sitting on his lap. Isabelle played her part to the hilt with his son. She waxed nostalgic about the father, calling him her one true love."

"Knowing her true feelings for the man, I'm amazed she could pull it off," Sara remarked.

"She must have executed it brilliantly. When Huber saw the photo, he recognized the image as his father, and told her who he was. She welcomed him as a second son. And, naturally, sons provide funds for their mothers. Isabelle is doing very well indeed for her assistance."

Mozzie didn't elaborate, but Neal knew for certain Isabelle would never have any monetary worries again.

"Did he go ahead and pay?" Henry asked.

"He came equipped with cash, and they settled on the spot. Isabelle told him the story we'd concocted. The fractal equations indicated an antenna frequency which was likely still broadcasting from the U-boat. She also mentioned that Neal had the assistance of a brilliant mathematician"—Mozzie gave a slight bow—"She had the impression that someone else was lending assistance. For an additional sum of money, she agreed to try to find out who."

"And Huber swallowed the tale?" Henry asked skeptically.

Mozzie shrugged. "It appears greed has taken over any caution he might have otherwise exhibited. Isabelle made a strong case that she'd been treated badly by her fellow citizens after the war."

"That part was true," Neal said. "Very few knew the truth about her work for the Resistance. Most reviled her as a Nazi sympathizer. She was forced to flee Paris and change her identity to avoid persecution."

"She's having her vindication now," Mozzie said. "In a week she'll return to Huber with news of Henry's involvement."

El paused to brush a lock of hair off her forehead. She stepped back to inspect the patio door and frowned at the streaks the sun revealed. She and Peter were at home washing windows while Neal and his crew were lazing on a sailboat off Cape May—plotting adventures, scuba diving. They were in swimsuits. She was in an old pair of faded jeans with a kerchief holding back her hair.

Peter walked by and waved at her as he moved to the windows on the side of the house. El tackled
the patio door with renewed determination, shaking off her momentary blues. They had a rare Saturday to themselves. Yvonne was working for her at the event tonight. El's community theater was on summer break which meant no scripts to study. They planned to go to Donatella's for an early dinner then take in a movie, then . . . El smiled. Perhaps they weren't dealt the short end of the stick after all.

When the phone rang, she set down the bottle of window cleaner and went into the kitchen to answer it. At the sound of Kramer's voice on the other end, her pulse quickened. The moment they'd prepared for had arrived, and she was being called on stage.

"What a pleasant surprise, Phil!"

"You're being too kind," he said. "Disturbing you on a Saturday morning? You must think I'm the worst kind of workaholic."

His friendly, casual voice was a shock. It brought back memories of the pleasant dinners they'd shared in previous years when Peter and Phil were friends. Now he was a traitor working against them. El thrust those thoughts aside and conjured up the Phil of old. She couldn't let a hint of her present feelings seep through.

Her efforts to catch Peter's eye were foiled. He was working industriously on a window and didn't look in her direction. That wasn't a problem. They'd agreed for her to engage Kramer in light conversation for several minutes before handing the phone to Peter. El relied upon her knowledge of the art scene to keep the words flowing. Kramer was an expert on the subject and kept up with the latest exhibitions. He was also familiar with her catering business.

"I expect Peter any moment," she said after an acceptable amount of reminiscing.

"Knowing Petey, I bet he's coaching some Little League game."

"Did you forget about his other love?"

There was silence for a moment before Kramer answered. "He was into crosswords . . ."

"Cars, Phil! A college buddy's in town. David now works for a brokerage firm in Boston. He bought a Ferrari Spider and drove it down for the weekend. He and Peter are out taking it for a spin. Peter is in sports car heaven." She paused to give an innocent chuckle. "David better watch out. Peter might not let him have the car back."

"I didn't realize he was a sports car enthusiast."

"Oh my, yes. It goes back to a Mustang convertible he owned in college. Didn't he mention it to you? He lavished far more attention on that car than on his dates." El bit her lip at her defamation of Peter's character as she spun yet more stories about her husband, the would-be Mario Andretti. While she talked, she continued to wave at Peter through the window. Did he have to be so conscientious? He refused to glance her way. She was on the point of making an excuse when finally Peter looked at her. At the sight of her frantically pointing to the phone, he dropped his rag and sprinted for the door.

"And here he is!" she said. "Such a pleasure talking with you, Phil. If you're ever in town, you must join us for dinner." She handed the phone to Peter and perched on a kitchen stool to enjoy his performance.

They'd already rehearsed the conversation. Now she could relax and be the proud director. Peter went into glowing details about the Ferrari. That was a no-brainer for her husband. It was why
they'd picked cars for the con. Peter's love of that first Mustang was real and so was his enthusiasm for sports cars. All he had to do was give expression to them.

Once Peter hung up, he explained the excuse Kramer had given for the call. "Phil said his unit was working on a set of new policies for art forgery investigations. He claimed the objective was to facilitate cooperation between museums and insurance companies in their work with the FBI. It's a plausible tale and quite likely true. He intends to come to New York sometime in the next couple of weeks. He wanted to know if I had any travel plans."

"Did he mention your trip to Paris?" El asked, going to the refrigerator. It was lunchtime. They could eat while plotting their next move. She set out a container of cold cuts and placed it on the butcher block table while Peter retrieved the bread from the bread box.

"No, but I bet he wondered about it. We'd made all the arrangements privately. It was only after our return that we entered the trip into the file as being official Interpol business. An organization like Ydrus would have had no difficulty in discovering the flight and hotel details."

She handed him a beer and poured herself an iced tea. Clinking glasses with him, she asked, "I assume we're going to the Ferrari dealership this afternoon?"

He smiled. "I've been waiting a long time to hear that. We'll need to be thorough. A test drive will be mandatory."

"I'll need to dress the part. In fact, I may need to buy a new wardrobe for this con."

He adopted a stern look for two seconds than snickered. Peter never snickered. Was it the mention of the test drive? They needed to discuss cars more often. "Neal already suggested that you'd like some new threads. He's provided the funds courtesy of Vincent Adler."

"Don't worry. I'll restrain myself to just a few items. I realize you'll need to account for everything."

"I'm honestly not concerned. All of us have been jerked around by Adler and Azathoth for months. It's time for us to splurge a little."

El approved wholeheartedly. As they made their sandwiches, her thoughts drifted back to Neal. She hoped he'd already told Henry about the curse, so he could relax and enjoy the cruise. Neal's defense mechanism to Astrena was to act as if nothing was wrong. Would Henry be able to as well?

After the events in July, both Henry and Neal deserved some kickback time. Beautiful weather was forecast for Cape May. They'd spend the night on the boat under the stars... Henry said he'd take along his guitar to serenade the reluctant couple. If he knew about the headwinds facing Neal, would he still want to?

WCWCWCWCWCWCWC

That night Neal and his fellow pirates feasted on the deck under a full moon. Before leaving Cape May, they'd stocked up on blue claw crabs and scallops. After their picnic, Henry pulled out his guitar. While he and Neal sang, Sara focused her attention on Mozzie. If Henry had hoped the romantic atmosphere would set off any visible sparks between them, he was doomed to be disappointed.

Neal's mind drifted to the final scene of Diana's last story. He and Sara had danced under a starlit sky. Arkham Neal yearned to take Sara into his arms and sing of stars and love. Had Henry suggested that moment? He knew about their sailboat plans. It would have been just like him, and Neal longed to take him up on the idea. The words to the song "Vincent" were even more
memorable, now that he'd visited the village where Van Gogh spent so much time. Starry, starry night . . .

Resolutely Neal banished those thoughts into the closet of secrets marked Alicia and Matthew. For now, Sara would see much more of Mozzie than him. The two of them intended to spend the evening sketching the script for Henry's short feature. Mozzie's girlfriend Janet had already signed up to help on costumes. Richard would assist with makeup. Henry's boyfriend Eric was a skilled carpenter. He would have been a welcome addition on props, but Henry refused to involve him in the con.

Neal understood his reasoning. It was unlikely that Eric would be targeted by either Adler or Ydrus, but the fewer people who knew about Operation Barbarossa the safer everyone would be. Still, Neal wondered what excuses Henry made for his frequent disappearances.

Neal hadn't realized Sara was such a movie buff. Mozzie was enchanted with her assistance. Once the plotting became serious, Neal and Henry were exiled to the far end of the boat, much to Henry's consternation. They settled on playing chess while the others schemed.

Neal was less than sympathetic to Henry's grumbles. "Welcome to my world. The Arkham Round Table won't let Peter and me sit in unless they want something from us."

"But this is supposed to be a birthday present. Don't I have any say?"

"You're already the hero. Consider yourself lucky. With Mozzie writing the script, it could be so much worse." He called out to the plot schemers, "Be sure to include a love interest for Henry."

Mozzie chortled gleefully. "Already in the works, mon frère."

Henry groaned. "Don't turn this into another Arkham Files, I'm begging you." In his distraction he exposed his bishop to an easy takedown which Neal would take full advantage of.

"Oh, I hadn't thought of that," Sara said. "A series?" She turned to Mozzie and whispered something in his ear whereupon the two were seized with a fit of the giggles.

"They're kidding, right?" Henry asked uncertainly.

Neal shrugged. "Who knows? Aidan plans to shoot the preliminary U-boat footage in the next two weeks and film the rest by the end of October. After the con is finished, there won't be a problem in letting Eric participate in the production. It could be just the ticket to make amends after leaving him in the dark for so long. And you may prefer him to whoever else Mozzie comes up with."

Henry didn't answer and studied the chessboard. Unless Henry saw the danger he was in, Neal would have checkmate in three moves.

"This can't be easy for you," Henry remarked.

"What? Beating you at chess?"

"No, and you don't have checkmate yet. That psychic vampire . . ."

"Oh, her."

"Yeah, her. I'm proud of you for telling the others. It must have been excruciating."

"Not my usual mode of operating," Neal acknowledged. "Peter and I made a deal. I promised to let
him know if there's any change to report, and in the meantime he doesn't bring it up. I'd like you to do the same."

"You're compartmentalizing it."

"Big time, bro. There's nothing I can do about it. Ignoring it isn't that difficult. I've done some crazy things in the past, but this has to be the wackiest threat I've ever had to deal with." Neal put as light a spin on it as he dared. Henry knew it was an act, but if Neal could treat it that way, so could he. The last thing he needed was to have Henry hovering. "It helps that Sam's dealing with the same issue."

"When did you speak with him last?"

"On Thursday. He's also symptom free."

"I need to meet Chloe, this chick you're so dependent on. What makes you think she can possibly find a potion that will work?"

"Chloe has a knack for herbs and potions. Her psychic landlady calls it"—Neal paused to make air quotes—"the Gift. Chloe was the one who inadvertently called up that swamp spirit in New Jersey. She concocted an oil which kept vampires from recognizing my scent."

"Why do you believe the cure has anything to do with orchids?"

"It's not me who feels that way. There are reports going back to the Middle Ages which claim Astrena's power is associated with orchids. According to the Winchesters, she could have established the link by casting a spell with an infusion which included a sample of my blood as well as specific varieties of orchids. A cure probably contains similar ingredients along with a counterspell."

Neal was growing increasingly uncomfortable with Henry's questions. Once he started thinking about Astrena, it was all too easy to imagine her lashing out at him like she had in Shepherdstown. Those visions he'd had of her . . . her long hair acting like so many strands of live wire. She was once more inside his head, draining him.

His stomach gave a lurch. Too many scallops? Neal had never been seasick, but then he also hadn't sailed much. A fresh wave of nausea made sitting down impossible. He stood up abruptly and strode to the side of the boat.

Henry jumped up to follow him, positioning himself between Neal and the others. "Are you seeing her?"

"Astrena? No, it's just . . ." Neal let a wave of his hand suffice for the words, and kept a fist clenched in front of his face. Hurling in front of Sara was out of the question.

"You want to go inside?"

Neal shook his head. "It's getting better."

"You know if Chloe needs orchids from Africa, Thailand, wherever, I'll arrange it, no problem."

Neal nodded, taking deep breaths as the nausea gradually receded.

"We won't talk about it anymore," Henry assured him. "You were just about to announce checkmate. Don't you want to come back before I rearrange the chess pieces?"

Neal flicked a glance at Sara. Her face betrayed her concern. If Henry had glanced at her, he
probably would have thought she was simply distressed over a seasick pirate, but it was a reminder to be more careful.

**Their adventure aboard the Black Diamond came to a close far too quickly.** On Sunday afternoon Neal watched with regret when Sara lowered the Jolly Roger as they sailed back into the harbor at Cape May. Jones had spent Sunday morning lounging on the beach with his girlfriend Helen and was on the scene to snap photos of the Black Diamond returning to the dock.

The week ahead had already been carefully scripted.

Neal and Sara would return to New York with Mozzie. Henry would sail the boat to its permanent docking berth in Baltimore then return to New York. Mozzie intended to divide his time between the fractal code, the movie script, and the dissemination of rumors, both online and in tabloid publications.

As for Neal, *Harlequin and Columbine* would be front and center. He'd already done the preliminary work on the Degas forgery and hoped to finish it midweek. In his role of Harlequin, sly trickster, he could shirk his work at the Bureau in order to spend more time with the painting and with his con partner Sara. For her part, Sara would live up to the role of Columbine. She was scheduled to disguise herself first as Kate for the benefit of Jones's camera then as Alicia at Riffs.

But as so often happens with scripts, last minute rewrites can introduce complications.

That evening while he was on the phone with Sara, Bianka called and left a text message.

"What did she want?" Sara asked.

"She's invited me out to lunch on Tuesday. She said she'd be in lower Manhattan visiting art galleries."

"You should accept," Sara declared. "You could meet in the FBI lobby. Some of your co-workers might see you. It will provide us with extra cover."

"It would enhance my reputation as a two-timer," Neal agreed, "but I don't want to send her the wrong signal."

"Has she ever come onto you?"

"No." Neal hesitated a moment. Was that right? This was the third time she'd asked him out in a little over a week, but since he'd had other commitments, they didn't really count. "You're sure Alicia won't mind?"

"She's not the jealous type, and she knows you'll be all hers on Thursday."

Bianka's invitation would play well for them, especially if he was being followed. He was supposed to be two-timing Sara with Kate. Adding another woman to the mix simply enhanced the image he was going for. Neal had no intention of hurting Bianka. In two weeks when classes started, he'd cede the field.

But when he met her for lunch, she threw the playbook out the window. So much for being a shy exchange student.

Bianka revealed a new side to herself. Even the restaurant she'd picked—a romantic French bistro
where they sat side by side on banquets—was revealing. Up to now, she'd only engaged in casual flirting. Not today. Simmering innuendos turned into boiling passion as her hands took full advantage of being close to him.

In his experience, women didn't make such a radical change overnight without an ulterior motive. And until he understood what game Bianka was playing, he'd keep his seat at the chessboard.

He'd never had any romantic interest in her, but since she was the one who started it, Neal saw no reason not to play along. He was supposed to project a playboy vibe and she made a good smokescreen.

After lunch, she walked with him back to the plaza in front of the Federal Building. Before leaving, she surprised him with a prolonged kiss which left no doubt as to her intentions. He hoped anyone who might be tailing him enjoyed the spectacle.

Lunch, what with the extracurricular activities, had gone on longer than expected. When he darted to the elevator bank, he found Peter holding the elevator door for him with a mischievous smile on his face.

"I saw you enter the building. That was quite a show you and the blonde regaled me with on the plaza."

That was tease worthy, and they had the elevator car to themselves. Neal pressed the button for the twenty-first floor. "Glad you enjoyed it. Did you wait for me in the lobby so you could ask me about her?"

"It did make me wonder. I thought you'd wanted to keep your dates a secret. That was Bianka, if I'm not mistaken."

"It was, but she's simply one of many." His puzzle-master boss would be less likely to guess Sara was the only woman on his radar if Neal added some random noise to the screen.

"How many others are we talking about?"

How far should he carry the joke? Neal decided to hold off on Alicia for the moment and deflect in a different direction. "Bianka invited me out to lunch. I'd taken her to Riffs, the new rock club, a few weeks ago. She's wanted to go back, but my weekends have been booked solid recently. You and El should try the restaurant she selected. El would love it."

The car stopped on the tenth floor, and an agent from Organized Crime got on. Neal recognized him as one of Ruiz's pals and exchanged a quick glance with Peter. It was time to prime the well.

Neal launched into lavish praise on the restaurant and the number of courses they'd had. Peter smoothly fell into his role of indulgent boss, making a point of excusing the extra-long lunch hour Neal had taken.

When the agent got off on the eighteenth floor Neal hoped he went straight to Ruiz. Not that he wouldn't have to wait. Diana had left for one of her marathon lunches with Ruiz before Neal and was probably still out.

Peter invited him to his office to review the status of the Degas forgery. They were still at it when Diana popped in.

"Where did you go?" Neal asked.
She pulled up the extra chair to sit beside him in front of Peter's desk. "I'll have to spend more time working out tonight, but it was worth it. I was in Italian heaven at Pepolino's."

Before she'd gotten a chance to describe each delectable dish, Peter cut in. "Some of us who brownbag it are still supposed to get work done. Did Ruiz take the bait?"

She smiled smugly. "And then some. I told him I'd noticed Jones had a photo album open on his computer. When he was called away, I sat down, fully intending to enjoy the latest photos of his nephew Ethan."

"Nosy, aren't you?" Neal commented. "A reminder never to have anything incriminating lying around."

She shrugged, clearly enjoying the game. "Too late." Turning to Peter, she added, "Boss, you can imagine my surprise when I saw photos of Neal and Sara at Cape May. Jones also had documented them leaving the harbor with Henry on a sailboat." She paused to shake her head with disapproval. "Flying the Jolly Roger? I was scandalized. Yet another example of Neal sneaking off. That illness he conveniently came down with was obviously phony." She leaned forward conspiratorially. "Ruiz has now promised me a transfer to Organized Crime where after a few months he'll make me his second-in-command. He explained that he'd like to hold off on the transfer for a few weeks so I can gather additional evidence on Caffrey."

"Is he still flirting with you?" Peter asked.

"I guess you could call it that, but he's not putting any pressure on for us to date. It's easy enough for me to stoke his ego without having to deal with the fallout. I've succeeded in gaining Ruiz's confidence to the point that today he mentioned Fowler for the first time."

"What did he say?" Neal asked eagerly.

"He went on at length about what a travesty it was that you'd destroyed Fowler's career. He's convinced that somehow you succeeded in implicating Fowler in the theft of Marie Antoinette's diamond earrings last November. Ruiz appears to honestly believe it. Now you're tarnishing Peter's career."

"In other words, by spying on me," Neal said, "you're performing a valuable service to the Bureau and saving Peter's job."

She shrugged. "You're a menace. Someone has to stop you. Ruiz asked me to monitor your movements and keep a journal. Boss, has Win-Win made any progress in tracing his calls?"

"Jones and I discussed it this morning. Win-Win reports that the transmissions are rerouted through a mare's nest of switching centers, each one of which has to be detangled. If you want the specifics, I'm sure Jones and Travis could supply them to you in excruciating detail. The most likely location appears to be Europe. There's no proof but I'm inclined to believe one of the countries in Eastern Europe. Some of the governments would be only too happy to receive bribes for keeping Adler's location secret."

**A Villa along the Albanian Riviera. Wednesday afternoon.**

Kate skimmed her hand through the water of the swimming pool as she floated on her lounger. The sun was brilliant in the sky. She should probably apply more sunscreen, but that would mean leaving the pool and she was far too comfortable for anything so drastic.

She took another sip of iced tea, her eyes taking in the beauty of the mountains around her.
Vincent's villa on the rugged coastline had been a surprise. He'd purchased it a year ago—a refuge available at a minute's notice. And that's how they used it. When Henry sneaked into their Argentinian refuge last month, he precipitated their flight.

Kate was grateful for Henry's intrusion. She should have kissed him when she entered his cell to rescue him. She smiled to herself, wondering what his reaction would have been. As it was, he looked ready to fall at her feet and worship her.

She'd been bored out of her mind in the rainforest. No shops, no restaurants, no art galleries for over a year. Vincent had been teasing her about their next safe house. If Henry hadn't arrived, she would have needed to call Interpol herself. Anything to escape the isolation.

Now that was a rapidly fading memory. The private jet had whisked them from Paraguay to their new home. When she arrived, it was late at night, but she still felt like she'd entered paradise. Then when the sun came up over the mountains and she saw the surroundings, she was overcome with gratitude.

Everything about the villa was sleek, modern, and new. It was a fresh start for both of them. Vincent had greased government wheels to ensure there would be no interference. Acquiring the necessary certificates for their new aliases had been simplicity itself. And now they were in Europe. Already they'd taken trips to Vienna and Florence. Garrett could easily travel to Paris when the Braque came on the market.

After so many months, Vincent finally had his prize. His gambit had paid off.

When Henry sneaked onto the estate, not only had he rescued her from her jungle exile, but he'd provided the opportunity Vincent had been looking for. After having conducted a decades-long fruitless search for the U-boat, he believed his chance of locating the hoard of plundered art was nil unless he secured the painting. Kate had warned him that Neal wouldn't agree to work for Vincent again, not after all the money Neal had lost in the Ponzi scheme. And Vincent had agreed.

The plan he'd hatched was a long shot, but he was willing to risk it. Since he couldn't find the U-boat, let Henry and Neal do it. He allowed Henry to escape with a copy of the letter from Bergmann. Kate provided the necessary background information by allowing herself to be questioned by him. It was one of the best cons she'd ever pulled.

And now they'd done it. When Vincent heard that the painting was being offered for sale, he knew it had to be Neal, and Garrett was able to confirm it. The Braque now hung as a trophy in Vincent's study.

Neal wouldn't have sold it unless he'd already learned the painting's secret, not after Henry told him what he'd discovered in Argentina. Some might wonder why Adler bothered to acquire the painting, but there was always the chance that Neal could have overlooked something. Neal had grown reckless and over-confident. The reports from Ruiz were revealing.

Neal and Henry would never trust Vincent. A permanent partnership was unthinkable. But a temporary alliance benefiting all was looking brighter than ever. Once the art was sold, they could go their separate ways. Vincent had already begun to cultivate potential buyers. Through Garrett's connections with the Italian and Serbian mafias, Vincent was forging new alliances.

A patio door opened. Kate shaded her eyes to see who it was.

"Planning your next shopping trip?" Vincent asked, strolling to the edge of the pool. His white linen shirt set off his newly acquired tan. "You found the code. I won't be able to deny you anything."
"I wouldn't have discovered it if you hadn't provided such excellent reference materials," she said modestly, making sure he knew she realized it was a joint accomplishment.

"The Nazis developed the production of invisible inks to an art form."

"This particular ink was one of their favorites, made with cobalt salts." She glided her lounger closer to Vincent. She'd needed to apply two separate reagents and even then, the message had remained visible for only an hour.

"I'd long thought the Atlantic Seaboard was the probable location. What my salvage company didn't succeed in discovering, our two unwitting accomplices did. Somehow they must have been able to pinpoint the location. Last weekend Henry was sailing off Cape May."

"Was Neal with him?" she asked as the patio doors opened once more. Garrett walked out, wearing a tropical shirt and swim trunks.

Vincent nodded. "Ruiz just confirmed it. Garrett, tell Kate what else Ruiz reported."

Garrett fixed himself a gin and tonic at the bar and brought it over. His face was sunburnt from the Albanian sun. Kate had been suspicious of Garrett at first. Perhaps it was the name. Fowler reminded her of a foul piece of work, or poultry fowl. She smiled to herself. He'd looked like a red-faced turkey after he messed up in November. Now he was Vincent's peacock.

Neal had gotten her started making word associations with people's names. She did miss that charmer. She'd thought about him when she'd worked on the painting, visualizing him searching for the same hidden message. Would they ever be reunited?

Garrett set his drink on a poolside table. "Ruiz learned that Caffrey ducked out early on Friday and spent the weekend at Cape May. Diana Berrigan, the agent Ruiz has been schmoozing, provided the intel. Hughes has been using Jones to spy on Caffrey. Berrigan saw photos of the boat and Caffrey at Cape May along with Winslow and a Sterling-Bosch investigator named Sara Ellis."

Garrett turned to Kate. "You realize what that means. Caffrey's no longer making much of a pretense to fit into the Bureau's culture. Hughes is no slouch, and Caffrey knows it. He must be planning to chuck the FBI before too long. Morale at White Collar is at an all-time low. Everyone blames Caffrey. Ruiz thinks I may be able to get my old job back."

When Kate laughed, Vincent said, "It's not such a stretch. There's no proof that Garrett works for me. Ruiz continues to believe he was an innocent victim. He's told Garrett many of the other agents support his view. Garrett was very popular at the Bureau. If Caffrey's sufficiently tarred, Garrett could be reinstated."

Vincent could be right. When Garrett fled the country, he'd only been wanted for questioning. Charges were never filed. He'd once been a valuable resource for Vincent when he worked at the FBI. Could he resume that role?

Notes: Neal's left the Black Diamond, but he's still living a pirate adventure. Neal the Buccaneer is the subject of my blog post this week.

Penna and I would like to wish all the dads a Happy Father's Day! Neal has already spent two Father's Days with Peter. The first time was in Chapter 2 of Caffrey Disclosure. They also celebrated the occasion in Chapter 2 of Fireflies at Midnight. Although next week's chapter is set in
August, Peter's relationship to Neal will be on display—both as dictated by the con and his true feelings. Meanwhile Neal and Sara, disguised as Kate, go on a date, and the team sets the stage for the upcoming con. It's a tense moment when Travis realizes there's a spy in their midst.

Blog: Penna Nomen & Silbrith Conversation: www.pennasilbrithconversation.blogspot.com
Chapter Visuals and Music: The Harlequin's Shadow board on the Caffrey Conversation Pinterest website: www.pinterest.com/caffreycon
Reprobates at Work


"Hold on, Joe," Peter retorted sharply. "Simply because you and Noelle can't control Henry, don't blame Neal. It's clear to any objective observer that Henry's the culprit. He's the one who appropriated Graham's sailboat without asking. How many weeks has he been goofing off? Three? Four? That sort of behavior may be tolerated in a family-owned business, but if he worked for the FBI, they'd have already kicked his ass out of here."

"Mocking Henry for a life-threatening injury? How dare you!" Joe sputtered. "I'll have you know—"

"Can it," Peter jeered. "Neal's been a model employee. He's impressed everyone with his diligence. He makes valuable contributions every day. If he's in any trouble—which I doubt strongly—it's all Henry's fault."

Neal paused the tape. "Diligent, model employee . . . Jones, you gotta give me a copy."

Peter snorted. "This is official Bureau property and not meant for personal entertainment."

Neal turned to Travis and whispered something in his ear. Peter knew he was sunk.

"Your brother's voice rings with sincerity," Jones said. "My hat's off to both of you."

Peter was holed up with Neal, Travis, and Jones in Travis's small testing room adjacent to the lab where they were reviewing a phone conversation Peter held with Joe the previous afternoon. The soundproof testing room had shielding sufficient for Travis's team to experiment on their electronic equipment without fear of contamination or interference. It was also an ideal location for the conspirators to talk in complete security.

Peter looked forward to passing along to Joe the compliments about his performance. The bit about how Noelle was stressing was pitched perfectly. To hear Joe describe it, she was a nervous wreck, worrying about how her precious boy was being led astray by Neal, the permanent juvenile delinquent. Joe also managed to work in hints that Win-Win was concerned about Henry's erratic behavior. That would foreshadow the next call.

When a knock was heard on the door, Travis rose to answer it. Neal's fellow reprobate was standing in the doorway.

"Diana told me where you were," Henry said. "I found her working on her script for Ruiz. She'll meet him for lunch in an hour and is revising some of her remarks based on the recording."

"Where's he taking her to lunch today?" Peter asked.

"She mentioned something about Morton's Steakhouse," Neal said with a sympathetic wince in his direction as if he knew Peter's deviled ham sandwich was waiting for him in the breakroom refrigerator.

"Jones, you've no right to groan," Travis protested. "You got to spend the weekend at Cape May while Aidan and I burned the midnight oil on that fractal code. Aidan had hoped his skill in cracking computer code would transfer to World War II-era cryptography, but this is a different beast entirely. Even with Mozzie's lessons, it's been a hard slog."
"Any breakthroughs?" Peter asked hopefully.

Travis pondered for a moment, steepling his fingers in front of his mouth. "Aidan and I have now agreed that Lévy's code is more difficult than deciphering Rolf's malware code. Does that count?"

"It explains why Mozzie brought it on board the Black Diamond," Henry said, chuckling. "That's the name we gave to Pops' sailboat, by the way. Really careless of Mozzie to leave behind a scrap of paper with the name scribbled on it as well as some random fractal equations."

"Is that part of the evidence Graham will present?" Jones asked.

Henry nodded. "We also left behind a receipt for the diving compressor."

Graham Winslow was an active participant in the con and had made several suggestions on how to document Henry's descent. As Henry outlined the plans his grandfather had made, one of Travis's instruments uttered a low beep. Travis rolled his chair over to a bank of monitoring equipment along the wall.

"No one's listening in, I hope?" Neal asked.

Jones shook his head. "Not possible. This room is shielded from any transmissions."

"But not against signals coming from within the room," Travis said, his face troubled. He retrieved a small device from a drawer. "I'll need to scan us."

Neal's eyebrows rose to his hairline. "A spy in our midst?"

The culprit was quickly found—Henry's watch. He stared at it accusingly. "How long have you been betraying me?"

"Was this the watch you wore to Adler's hideout in Argentina?" asked Peter. If the bug had been on Neal, he might have suspected the Mansfeld brothers, but Henry was far more likely to be targeted by Adler.

Henry nodded, looking perplexed. "We were concerned he might have planted something. Kate returned my watch along with my phone and pen when she freed me from the cell. There was plenty of opportunity to plant a device. But the techs at Win-Win tested all my equipment when I returned to the States and nothing was found." He unfastened his watch and handed it to Travis. "Have at it."

Neal flipped a pen between his fingers as he considered the traitorous Rolex. "Could the signal have been activated remotely?"

Travis pulled out a toolkit and placed the watch under a magnifying lamp. "Theoretically, but the bug has to be on such a miniature scale that the technology would be difficult to implement."

"We planned for the possibility that our location was being monitored," Henry said. "If Adler received my signal, what did he learn? I spent a couple of weeks sailing along the Atlantic Seaboard and a weekend in Cape May. That's precisely what we want them to know."

Neal made a face. "But if he's been listening in to your conversations—"

"—we're screwed," finished Henry glumly.

"Here's the spy. It's the battery." Travis pulled it out and examined it under a magnifying lamp. "It can only transmit a locator signal. No worries about being overheard."
"Is it precise enough to pinpoint the warehouse?" Jones asked.

"I don't think so, but it's an impressive bit of engineering. The battery appears completely ordinary. It only reveals its true colors when opened. Whoever designed it was a genius."

"Like one of those mad Nazi scientists Mozzie loves talking about?" Neal quipped.

He was joking, but the implication was deadly serious. "Adler must have had this already built when Henry sneaked into his Argentina hideout," Peter pointed out. "How had he intended to use it?"

Neal turned serious as well. "He's made use of agents before. He could have been planning to place it in my watch."

That was Peter's suspicion as well. With Travis and Jones in the room, he couldn't discuss Adler's earlier attempt. Last April, Fowler had sneaked back into New York to kidnap Mozzie. His goal was to find out if Neal had the Braque painting. Because of Mozzie's drug resistance, he was able to mislead his captors. Adler might have felt Neal was keeping Mozzie out of the loop. He'd intended to monitor Neal but when Henry arrived on the scene, Adler decided to use him instead.

Peter eyed the seemingly innocuous battery. "This is a reminder that Adler most likely has agents operating in New York. Stay sharp, everyone."

"Do you want me to replace the battery?" Travis asked.

"No, put it back in the watch," Henry said. "We can use this to our advantage."

"We can't take a chance with the warehouse," Peter cautioned. "Make sure not to wear it there. Have you already visited the site?"

"No, that was a stroke of luck. Mozzie procured the facility." Henry turned to the others. "Is tomorrow still our workday?"

Jones nodded. "Travis, Neal, Mozzie, and I will all be there."

Peter had reviewed the plans Jones made of the set construction. It had been a joint project with Mozzie. How often would Peter have the chance to build a Nazi treasure house? "Count me in as well. I have a meeting in the morning but will join you afterward. Henry, you're off the hook for carpentry detail."

"Miss out on this? Are you crazy? I'll go to work, drop off my watch, and let it be my stand in at the office." He turned to Neal. "How's the Degas coming?"

"I finished it last night. All that's left is the aging." Neal stretched his back. "I intend to reinforce my slacker status the next several days, starting this afternoon. I'm taking off an hour early."

"Your date with Kate?" Peter smiled at the irony of the moment. "I never thought I'd be saying those words, much less be happy about it. Where are you going?"

"We'll take a stroll in Riverside Park. Richard's meeting Sara at June's where he'll apply the prosthetics and makeup. There's a picturesque patch of woods just across the street from the mansion with benches under the trees where we can sit."

"The perfect location for me to catch you two in the act," Jones said with a grin.

WCWCWCWCWCWCWC
When Neal arrived home, June greeted him at the door with the news that Sara had already arrived and the transformation was in progress.

"Richard's with her now," she said. "He set up his studio in one of the guest bedrooms on the second floor."

"Did you see her dress? I gave her several suggestions based on clothes Kate wore."

June smiled. "Yes, I've seen it."

"And?"

Her eyes twinkled. "You'll just have to wait and see."

Neal started for the stairs, but unexpectedly June sprang in front of him and blocked the staircase. "You might as well forget taking a sneak peek. Richard's locked the door."

"Now why would he do something like that?"

"He doesn't want to ruin the effect when you see her for the first time."

"Isn't he getting a bit carried away? It's not like she's my bride."

June chuckled. "It does bring back memories of when Vanessa was married. She used that same room to dress for her wedding at Riverside Church."

"I've seen the photos in your study. She was a beautiful bride. Your granddaughter Cindy looks a lot like her. Does Cindy have a boyfriend?"

"Not yet. I expect she'll be like her mother. Vanessa had so much fun being single"—June paused to give him a pointed look—"I used to despair she'd ever settle down. I'm glad Sara and Richard can use the room to keep the spirit alive, even if it's only for a fake date."

Neal tried a new tact to pry details out of her. "I doubt Richard will be able to make Sara look much like Kate. I warned Jones not to take close-ups of her face."

She didn't take the bait. "Good advice. Should he focus instead on your love-struck expression?"

"That's right. Will this do?" Neal took June's hand and gazed longingly at her, channeling the look of a sailor who returns to port after a year-long voyage on the high seas and spots his sweetheart on the dock.

"Oh, Neal. If I'd only known that's how you felt about me..." The fantasy vanished when she began to laugh. "You're far too good at that. You should be required to carry a warning label for all women to be on their guard."

"No need to worry about Sara falling for me," he scoffed. "She knows it's just a game."

Neal headed upstairs to change, ignoring June's reproachful frown. She kept her eye on him, no doubt to make sure he didn't go astray. It would be child's play to pick the lock—and he was tempted—but she'd misread his intention.

It was a low blow to mention that the room had been used as a bridal dressing room. He hoped she hadn't told Sara. If everyone would just step back and ignore them, they might have a chance of it working out.
Any guilt about tricking June with the Clueless con was nullified by the bridal assault. Neal's stomach dropped. Surely June hadn't left any issues of *Modern Bride* lying in the room.

What color dress had Sara picked? Neal had suggested indigo—the color of midnight in a starlit sky. Kate had worn an indigo dress on one of their final evenings together. No trace of his former passion remained, but the memory was still bittersweet. He rummaged through his tie collection for the one he'd worn that night. Kate had bought it for him.

Sara had once commented how she wished they could take Doctor Who's TARDIS and travel back in time. Was that what he was doing? The thought was unsettling, until he realized this was giving him a chance to say a final goodbye to those emotions.

When Neal descended the stairs, he heard a door open on the second floor. Jogging faster, he arrived just as Richard and . . .

Neal stared speechless. Kate. Her smile, her hair. A sleeveless indigo sheath that closely matched the one he'd described.

As Sara came closer, the illusion was remarkably well maintained. "Hello, Neal," Sara said, in an eerily accurate imitation of Kate's voice.

"Richard, you're a magician!" he finally blurted.

Richard stepped back to scrutinize her. "She came out better than I expected. Getting the eyes right was tricky."

"I wish you had more recordings of her voice," Sara said. "My imitation's not very good."

"Close enough. Besides, Jones will be too far away to capture our voices." Neal studied her face from inches away. "The prosthetics are hidden so well that even close up they're barely noticeable."

Richard flushed at the praise. "I'm glad her hair is long. That helps disguise the edges. Is Jones in position?"

Neal nodded. "He texted me a few minutes ago. We'll be gone about thirty minutes."

Richard and June stood at the front door as they left. "Enjoy your stroll," said June mischievously. "The park is very romantic at sunset."

Neal grinned. "We intend to take full advantage of the atmosphere."

They left the house and crossed the street to reach the wooded walkway.

"Are you experiencing déjà vu?" Sara asked.

Neal slid his arm around her waist. "A little," he admitted. "I didn't expect the resemblance would be so close. It also makes me appreciate something else."

"What's that?"

"The entire time Kate and I were together, she was in disguise. She was in love with Adler, but she hid it from me. It's embarrassing to admit I didn't recognize it."

"We have that in common," Sara said sympathetically. "I didn't see through Bryan either."

They'd arrived at the park early enough that Neal was able to find an empty bench. They were
surrounded by trees and could gaze out over the Hudson River. The spot was ideal for that notorious paparazzi Clinton Jones.

"Seeing you as Kate . . . It reminds me that what she and I had was fake. And even though you're in disguise and we have a basketful of aliases, what you and I have is real." He drew her close and gazed into her eyes. Richard had provided Sara with sapphire-colored contacts but he preferred thinking of her soft moss-green eyes. "You up for a little Shakespeare in the Park?"

Sara smiled, looking puzzled.

"Kiss me, Kate."

**WCWCWCWCWCWCWCW**

Midmorning on Thursday, Peter parked the Taurus on a side street in the industrial section of Brooklyn. His target was a nondescript brick warehouse on the corner of a block filled with similar structures. To look at it, no one would suspect that it was a repository of Nazi plunder or that it had the most elaborate security system Peter had ever inspected. Mozzie and Travis had spent two days on the configuration. This was a mousetrap for the record books.

According to the scenario they'd devised, the U-boat was being hauled to the GMD Shipyard in Brooklyn. The warehouse was nearby. On Saturday, the day the pirates were supposedly unloading the treasure, they'd instead be making a movie in the warehouse. Aidan planned to shoot the actors in green screen and add the background later. An ex-Navy buddy of Jones had secured permission from the Navy for them to use their photos of U-505, one of the few U-boats still in existence.

Jones had prepared meticulous documentation on the fictitious U-boat being salvaged. It was a scaled-down version, designed for speed, and only about half the size of the standard vessel. Since Hitler intended it to be a vault, he had it sunk in shallow waters so that the skeleton crew could escape to the surface. Jones was careful to explain that there would be no actual skeletons on board . . . or their lingering ghosts. The small size of the sub contributed to the difficulty in locating it.

Peter's team had turned into a band of spies, pirates, and U-boat enthusiasts. Even he had to admit that at the conclusion of the con, mortgage frauds were going to be a comedown.

The construction work was already well underway by the time he arrived. Neal and Mozzie were the co-foremen, with Travis and Jones their crew. Henry was nowhere to be seen.

Peter had brought along his work clothes in a gym bag. Everyone else was in jeans and t-shirts. Travis and Jones were nailing together a wooden crate. Neal was crouched in front of one of the completed crates, applying stencils of the Nazi swastika and Imperial Eagle.

Neal stood up, paintbrush in hand. "What do you think?"

"I'm starting to feel a little of that pirate blood, too," Peter admitted. Who couldn't catch Nazi treasure fever in such surroundings? Someday would his team discover the real thing? The sight of those crates made the possibility seem more attainable.

"Where's Diana?" Jones asked. "I thought she was coming with you."

"I met with her before I left the office. Ruiz asked her to attend a workshop he's running on the Yakuza. How did the photo shoot go?"

Jones grinned. "Man, I had to wipe my camera lens. Neal and Sara were generating so much steam, I thought someone would call the fire department on them."
"We had to sell the con," Neal retorted, appearing to revel in the description. "Kate and I were always very passionate."

The warehouse had minimal air-conditioning. Peter was glad to strip to his t-shirt. "According to your script, when will Sara obtain photos of the warehouse?"

"She'll take them covertly during the film shoot," Jones explained.

Travis reached for another board. "But when she does, won't Kramer want her to lead him immediately to the warehouse?"

"She won't be able to," Jones said, wiping his brow with a rag. "It seems that there's not much trust among pirates. Although Neal brings her here, he makes her wear a hood till she's inside."

"I suspect she can't be trusted," Neal said complacently.

"Let that be a lesson to you, Suit," Mozzie called out from the corner where he was setting up the sound stage. "Never trust a woman, except Mrs. Suit, of course."

"And June," Neal pointed out.

"And Diana," Jones added.

"My statement stands. Each woman must be carefully evaluated for exclusion. A few exceptions don't negate the rule." Mozzie gave Peter the double finger-point. When had Neal taught him that? "Come along. I have just the job for you."

He directed Peter to the stage. Peter's assignment was to set up the green screen backgrounds while Mozzie arranged the lights, based on Aidan's meticulous diagrams. Peter was relieved he was only responsible for the backdrops.

Mozzie was proud as a new father about that script. After the success of Aidan's first video, Yellowface the Masked Avenger, which Mozzie had written, his resume was rapidly expanding. He'd finished an expanded script for the Japanese anime company interesting in producing Yellowface. Henry's short feature would be Mozzie's first script for live actors.

Peter was glad to have an opportunity to talk with Mozzie where they wouldn't be overheard. The din of hammer pounding was loud enough to provide them a measure of privacy.

"What did you want to ask me?" Mozzie asked in a low voice.

"How'd you—never mind. I'm just happy I don't have to speak in code."

"What makes you think you don't have to?"

Was he serious? Peter didn't waste time finding out. "Do you have any news from Chloe?"

"I saw her Monday evening at the emporium. She was consulting with Billy about an orchid reference in the guide I brought back from Italy."

"What's her opinion of the book?"

Mozzie's answer wasn't reassuring. Ranzan's guide to the occult use of orchids had only general descriptions of potions with many of the ingredients left unidentified. The flowers listed were rare and in many cases unknown. Billy and his daughter Maggie were both experts on orchids. They'd been able to identify a few of the plants.
"There was an interesting note in the book which references an Irish botanist, a woman named Harriet Beaufort. According to Ranzan, she was the source of much of his information and had also written a book on the subject. The Winchesters are trying to track down a copy."

When Peter asked how Chloe tested the potions, Mozzie became even vaguer than normal, alluding to a pair of white mice. To test the various spells, Chloe had to first curse the mice with something. Peter still had his doubts on how much Chloe was to blame for the dork curse which had afflicted him last spring. Would her cure be worse than the curse?

Chloe was being aided in her efforts by Peony Mirliton, a psychic and fellow Wiccan herbalist. Chloe was staying at Peony's B&B on the Upper West Side. "They've succeeded in cursing the mice to not like cheese," Mozzie reported, "but are now unable to remove the curse."

"How do they know the curse they're using is even remotely similar to the spell used on Neal? According to the lore, Astrena established a psychic link with a potion which contained a sample of Neal's blood. Don't tell me Chloe drank a mouse's blood."

"Of course not." Mozzie scowled and took a deep breath. He reminded Peter of a piano teacher he'd had as a kid. The lessons only lasted a year. Peter had been miserable. The teacher had been miserable. That was one story Neal would never hear about. "It's impossible to duplicate the spell, so Chloe can only go by trial and error, testing various counterspells to see if they have the desired effect."

Horrified, Peter asked, "And Neal will eventually have to replace his white mouse stand-in?"

"Not precisely," he hedged. "Sam will as well."

"And how many bizarre and possibly dangerous side effects will they have to experience?"

"Neal knows the odds and the risks. He chooses to compartmentalize them, and you should too. We have Operation Barbarossa to focus on. Leave the curse to the hands of —"

"A novice Wiccan who doesn't know what the hell she's doing." The fact that Chloe succeeded in cursing something was in itself disturbing. Up to the moment the curse had been placed, the mice ate Cheddar with gusto. Now they wouldn't touch it. But even if Chloe succeeded in removing that curse, it didn't necessarily follow that she could sever the link to Neal.

The whole business was so wrong, Peter couldn't believe he was even discussing it. He should be worrying about criminals from Neal's past, not curses from Greek goddesses. And now there were mice everywhere he looked. Chloe's mice. Their mousetrap for Adler and Huber.

"Is Neal starting to show any symptoms?" Mozzie asked.

Peter glanced over at Neal stenciling an eagle on a crate, looking complete healthy. "Not that he's mentioned to me."

"Then we focus on the reality sandwich in front of us," Mozzie said. "The curse is lettuce and can be safely ignored for the moment." He called out to the others. "Isn't it time for lunch?"

**WCWCWCW**

Neal reached for another stencil and paused to survey his warehouse crew. After a break for lunch, Peter switched from green screens to crate construction. He and Jones were tackling one meant for a Renoir. The crate designs were based on photographic evidence obtained by the Monuments Men, the Allied group responsible for the art recovery effort during the war.
Over on the impromptu soundstage, Travis and Mozzie were setting up the light arrays. Aidan had come by midday to drop off yet more studio lights and sound equipment for the weekend shoot.

Neal checked his list. He'd prepared the specs for numerous works of varying sizes. Particularly critical were the paintings on the partial shipping manifest. Some of the works were quite large and would have required—

"Did you save something for me?"

Neal looked up at the sound of Henry's voice. "It took you long enough. I thought you were going to be here a couple of hours ago. Are you trying to reinforce your slacker status?"

"And seeing all your sweaty mugs is making me feel guilty," Henry admitted. "I've been shooting pool with Radha and Sofia."

Jones set down his hammer. "Does playing pool with your team count as work at Win-Win?"

"You might be surprised at how productive it can be," he said with a sneaky smile.

Neal knew that look. He'd found something. "Spill it," he demanded. He called out for Travis and Mozzie to join them.

Everyone gathered around as Henry pulled out a copy of The New York Times. "Sofia brought this to my attention." He opened up the paper to a section on local news and suggested they scan it.

The page contained a calendar of events for the next week. As they all studied the listings, Peter jabbed his finger at one short notice. "Is this what caught your eye?"

Henry nodded. "Not mine, but Sofia's."

Neal read the listing. "The World Herpetological Society?"

"That's it," Henry confirmed. "We'd been tossing around ideas—yes, we do work while we play pool—about how to identify the woman in the photo with Klaus, and Sofia suggested we look into this."

The photo Henry was referring to had been taken by a surveillance camera at Heathrow Airport a few weeks ago. It showed Klaus with an unidentified woman. All efforts to match her identity through facial recognition software had failed.

"You think because of the woman's tattoo she may be there?" Travis asked. He didn't quote the odds, but judging by his skeptical expression, Neal bet he was thinking about them and they were probably astronomically slim.

Henry nodded. "We know Ydrus is the name of a mythological sea serpent. The head of Ydrus is designated by the code Python with other key members also having aliases derived from snake species. The woman in the photo had a snake tattoo wrapped around the third finger of her right hand. Rolf's tech programmer Marta Kolar has a snake tattoo on her back."

"And you suspect there's a deeper significance attached to all those snake references," Jones said.

Henry nodded. "Sofia hypothesized that Python may be a snake enthusiast. She could keep them as pets or even have a scientific bent. Sofia has quite an imagination. She speculated that the woman could be a conservationist and is using the proceeds from the illegal arms trade to fund wildlife sanctuaries. Perhaps she prefers snakes to humans."
"And that's why she doesn't mind arming terrorists?" Peter smiled ruefully. "Sofia has a talent for profiling. She's also demonstrating why she belongs at Win-Win."

Henry's company was known for its reliance on psychologists for investigations. As far as Neal knew, Sofia hadn't studied psychology, but she was a Winston and had grown up mixing with the employees. Even though her father, Allen, was the CEO, Sofia had earned her job by her qualifications, not her bloodline.

Peter pulled out his laptop and booted it on. "It's a big leap to think that the woman in the photo is the head of Ydrus."

"It may not be that much of a stretch," Neal pointed out. "Chantal told us she suspected Klaus was having an affair when he was married to her. Someone as powerful as Python could have been irresistible to him."

"Did Chantal ever see her?" Travis asked.

"No. The only clue she could provide was that the woman wore Shalimar perfume. Once when Klaus returned home from a trip, Chantal smelled the fragrance in his suitcase."

"The World Herpetological Society is a leading international scientific organization in reptile research," Peter said, reading aloud as he scanned a webpage. "They hold an annual meeting where they present papers. It appears to be geared toward professionals, but many hobbyists also attend."

"The New York Zoological Society is hosting this year's event at Fordham University adjacent to the Bronx Zoo," Henry explained to the group. "The university partners with the zoo. In conjunction with the symposium, the zoo is preparing a special exhibit of its snakes. There are events scheduled for Monday and Tuesday of next week."

"Mozzie, what's that glint in your eyes about?" Peter asked.

He removed his glasses to polish them, radiating his happy Buddha smile of a new opportunity sparkling in front of his eyes. To Mozzie the world was one vast storehouse ripe for the picking. Although he might choose not to plunder its treasures immediately, simply knowing about their existence gave him reason to gloat. And Peter knew that. The cop in him was blaring a warning.

"You're thinking of the new art museum, aren't you?" Neal prompted.

"Can you blame me? Allow me to enlighten those of you who aren't familiar with it. The Fordham Museum of Greek, Etruscan, and Roman Art just opened. The Walsh family donated their entire collection. Many outstanding pieces which would make any collector salivate at the prospect. If Python attends the symposium, she could hardly resist paying a visit."

Henry made a note. "Sofia and Radha want to be present. They're already cramming their heads with snake trivia. Sofia in particular is a fiend for research. By the time Monday rolls around, she'll be able to dazzle anyone with her knowledge. She and Radha will portray themselves as new enthusiasts." Henry paused to shrug. "Sure, it's a million to one shot that Python or the woman in the photo will be there, but it's worth the gamble."

"I'd feel better if someone from White Collar was there as well," Peter said.

"I'll go!" Mozzie said eagerly.

"Someone with a badge," Peter amended.
"No problem," Mozzie assured him as Travis snickered and Jones attempted to look stern.

Peter took a deep breath. Neal could hear him counting to ten in his head.

"It will have to be someone in disguise," Henry warned. "If the woman is there and if she is Python, she'd recognize anyone from your team. We know you've been under surveillance."

"Diana won't mind," Neal suggested. "She loves wearing costumes."

"And Janet could disguise her," Mozzie offered. His eyes popped open wide. "She and I could go as a couple!"

Diana and Mozzie on surveillance duty together? The world's oddest couple? Peter, nobody's fool, said he'd contact Diana and leave it up to her to negotiate with Mozzie.

Tempting as it was to speculate on how'd they disguise themselves, Neal was more interested in what Sara would look like. She'd promised to masquerade as Alicia. Henry hadn't mentioned going to Riffs tonight, but his loft wasn't far away. Neal knew he often dropped in to listen and occasionally to perform a number or two. Would he stop by tonight? It was an extra element of danger that Neal loved. He'd already warned Sara to be on the alert.

Neal set Henry to put in some honest work for a change, giving him the specs for several of the largest crates to work on. When Henry groaned about it, Neal told him it was his own fault for not letting Eric in on the con. Eric was an expert carpenter and could have knocked them out quickly. For Henry, it would be a major challenge.

"You look happy," Peter commented, walking up to him.

"Thinking of disguises always makes me smile," Neal said. "And look at this superb example of team work. Jones and Henry are laying out those boards like they're working a jigsaw puzzle. What's not to be happy about?"

"Not a thing."

Beneath Peter's smile was an unusually serious look. That meant he was stewing over something but didn't want to share. Neal decided not to press him. He was living in the moment, and he had a long anticipated date with Alicia planned for the evening.

Notes: The New York Zoological Society is a real organization but the World Herpetological Society is fictitious. I fudged the date of the opening of the Antiquities Museum which actually opened its doors in 2007. Its proximity to the Bronx Zoo was too irresistible to be ignored. Jones's description of the Type XVII U-boat is factual. For any U-boat enthusiasts out there, Wikipedia has a page about them: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/German_Type_XVII_submarine

Adler found an actual U-boat in the canon episode "Under the Radar." The scene of Neal, Peter, and Alex in the shipyard was taken at the old Brooklyn Navy Yard, which is now part of GMD Shipyard. Penna and I have both have had so much pleasure in playing with the U-boat story in our AU, I was happy to add Easter eggs to a classic scene. I compared the two U-boat scenarios for our blog this week. The post is called The U-boat Arc.

Mozzie's reference to a reality sandwich comes from Allen Ginsberg: "A naked lunch is natural to us. We eat reality sandwiches. But allegories are so much lettuce. Don't hide the madness."
The summer solstice is almost here, and I indulged in a little midsummer madness of my own to celebrate the occasion. During a recent break from writing Caffrey Conversation stories, I wrote a couple of one-shots for the All Souls Trilogy fandom. I'll post them on June 21. The stories are for a new series, Six-Crossed Knot, and are called Madison Ghosts and Knot of One. If you're curious about them but haven't read the trilogy, I've included background information in the first story.

Blog: Penna Nomen & Silbrith Conversation: www.pennasilbrithconversation.blogspot.com
Chapter Visuals and Music: The Harlequin's Shadow board on the Caffrey Conversation Pinterest website: www.pinterest.com/caffreycon
Long Cool Woman in a Red Dress


Neal slid into a chair next to the smokin' hot babe seated at the table. Riffs was wall-to-wall people but no one outshone her. Her long honey-blonde hair was a tousled mop of curls. She had a slinky black tank top which was designed to be stared at and a seductive smile on her lips.

"Did you like the song, Alicia?" he asked.

She leaned toward him to murmur, "I loved it, particularly the way you muddled the words." She proceeded to give him a kiss which didn't quit.

He'd taken the classic Hollies song, "Long Cool Woman in a Black Dress," and made just a few changes. In Arkham Files, Sara was always the one muddling the lyrics. It was time for him to reciprocate. In Neal's version, the woman wore a red dress but as in the original, the singer worked at the FBI, and his woman had it all.

"Many in the crowd appear to know you," she commented. "Do you play here often?"

"I was here a couple of weeks ago, and I'll be back again tomorrow night. Bianka asked me to bring her here."

"Ah yes, my rival. Since Alicia's rather a tough girl, especially based on that song you just sang, should I put a hit on her?"

"So you're a gangster girl now?"

She laid her head on his shoulder and said in a sultry whisper, "I can be whoever you want me to be."

There was only one response to a come-on line like that as the temperature in the room skyrocketed. When they finally came up for air, Neal said, "I hope that put your mind to rest about Bianka."

"Right now I'm more interested in Kate. I'm supposed to storm into Hughes's office next week after having seen the two of you together." She raised a brow. "Where did I spot you?"

"Taking a stroll in the park?" he asked innocently.

She shook her head disapprovingly. "You can do much better than that."

"Why don't you tell me? You're the one who's a fan of historical romances. They must give you a few ideas."

"More than a few." She sat back studying him as she sipped her wine. "It's Sunday evening. A moonlit sky. I decide to surprise you."

"I like the sound of that," he murmured, his voice full of simmering passion. "What do you have in mind?"

"Ringing the doorbell is far too mundane for someone like me. Instead, I slip into a catsuit and climb the outside wall of the mansion. Then . . . "

"I'm waiting with bated breath."
She cocked her head at him and grinned. "And nothing else."

"Not even a fedora?"

"I have plans for that later. I sneak up to your patio door. There's a soft light coming from somewhere, but I don't see anyone. Whipping out my candy-apple lock picks, I have your door open in seconds."

"Actually, it would take you much longer and sirens would blare. Mozzie's installed a draconian security system—"

"Which you forgot to set," she countered, wrinkling her nose at him. "You must have been distracted."

"By what?" He had many ideas. Which one had she picked?

"Silently I open the door and sneak in. A woman's laugh signals you're not alone. I find you and Kate in bed. I appear to have arrived at an inopportune moment."

She'd picked his favorite!

"You leap out of bed, naked of course. Kate is too, but she covers herself with a sheet in a modicum of modesty. You grab your fedora. You must think I wouldn't harm a vintage hat."

"You don't shoot me, I hope?"

"I'm tempted to, but decide to snap several photos instead."

He sighed wistfully. "It's an excellent idea, but there's a major flaw. Under those circumstances, I'd hardly allow you to continue working with us."

"You're right. It won't be nearly as exciting, but I suppose I'll have to spot you in the park or on the terrace."

"Don't give up on the idea. There may be a way to make it work." Rehearsing that scene with her as Kate had a strong appeal. She could forget the disguise, and he definitely needed to see those candy-apple lock picks. But first things first. There was a dance floor at Riffs. Neal knew Sara loved to dance, and he couldn't wait to take her in his arms.

WCWCWCWCWCWCWC

Henry's decision to go to Riffs had been on the spur of the moment. Eric had been burning the midnight oil on a bid proposal. At first Henry viewed it as a blessing. Eric was so buried in his work that he didn't notice Henry's engagements. But that afternoon when Henry called him and Eric was too stressed to even talk to him, Henry knew they needed a break.

His conscience had been nagging him that he was partly responsible for Eric feeling overwhelmed. The bid was for the conversion of an old building in SoHo into affordable housing for artists. Initially Eric hadn't intended to participate in the competition. The project had a high profile due to it being sponsored by the SoHo Community Association and the SoHo Artists Alliance. Eric didn't believe his portfolio was robust enough, but during their sailing trip Henry persuaded him to give it a shot. Some friend he was. After coaxing Eric to go for it, Henry had offered zero support.

Eric's apartment was on the way to Riffs. It had become their favorite bar to grab a brew and listen to music. Sometimes Henry played, but especially lately he preferred listening to others while chilling
with Eric. They hadn't seen each other since their two-week sailing adventure, and Henry's tight schedule would likely continue for the foreseeable future. He'd considered opening up more to Eric, but much of his life was so alien to what Eric was used to, Henry didn't know what his reaction would be.

Henry hadn't committed the high profile crimes Neal had. When they were on the road together, the infractions had been minor, but he'd pulled his share of scams. And then how to explain his father and the crimes Robert had committed? Eric came from a close-knit extended family with four siblings and two uncles. Together they ran a home remodeling business. Eric's father was the anchor to the operation. Henry knew he'd eventually have to let Eric in if they stayed together. But why wreck the chance of that ever happening by disclosing his skeletons too early?

"I'm sorry," Eric said as they walked into the club.

Henry stared at him, baffled. "Why?"

"I'm being rotten company. I've hardly spoken two words on the walk over. You must have wondered what's wrong with me."

Henry kicked himself. What an idiot. He'd been so absorbed in his own thoughts, he hadn't noticed how distracted Eric had been.

"It's work," Eric admitted. "This job has me tied up in knots. I found out more about my competition today. Some of the most prestigious firms in the city are submitting bids." He made a nervous gesture. "But that's not as important as you. I shouldn't let it interfere."

Jeez. If Henry didn't know better, he'd think Eric was working a mind game on him. Henry was the one who should feel guilty. But Eric never engaged in deceptive mind games. He was a straight talker of complete integrity. Why he wanted to hang out with Henry was unfathomable.

"Forget it, man. I've been preoccupied with work myself. When's the deadline?"

"The bid must be submitted by September 30."

"Let's make a pact. Neither one of us should feel guilty. The case I'm working on should be wrapped up by the end of next month too. Whatever happens, we'll celebrate on October 1."

They grabbed a free table and snagged a couple of beers from a passing waiter. A musician Henry hadn't heard before was doing a good job with George Michael covers. After singing "Amazing," he followed up with "Fastlove." Henry's eyes drifted over the crowd dancing then did a double take.

"What are you staring at?" Eric asked.

Henry nodded to the couple in the middle of the floor. "That's Neal."

Eric glanced in their direction and grinned. "Who's the blonde?"

"I can't tell for sure. Probably Bianka, but they're so busy sucking face, I can't make out her features."

"And why are you scowling? You told me you investigated her and didn't find anything wrong."

"She's not right for him."

"How could you possibly know? You've never met her."
"It's just a feeling." Henry couldn't elaborate. He hadn't told Eric about his matchmaking strategy for Neal and Sara. Something told him Eric wouldn't approve.

"This is nonsense," Eric declared. "Let's go meet her." He drained his beer. "You coming?"

Henry checked the dance floor once more as he stood up. "Too late. They've disappeared."

"They couldn't have. They were here just a minute ago."

He and Eric scanned the crowd, but Neal had vanished and the blonde with him. Had Neal spotted them? Did he think Henry was trying to spy on him? For the first time, Henry had real doubts about his strategy being the correct one. He'd devised the plan before he knew that Neal had become the victim of a goddess.

Henry had called Peter to discuss it when they returned from Cape May, and Peter confirmed everything Neal said. The psychic connection was in itself unbelievable. And that Neal had opened up about it was even more so. It also made Henry question if Neal would ever be romantically interested in Sara.

Neal wouldn't have told a woman he was interested in dating that he was cursed, and yet he'd had no problem filling Sara in. Sure, Peter had ordered him to tell con participants, but Neal could have easily wiggled out of informing Sara.

Would Henry tell Eric he had a curse hanging over his head? Definitely not.

Eric was right. Henry hadn't found anything negative about Bianka. Neal was clearly enjoying the moment. Wasn't it time for Henry to back off and let Neal have some fun wherever he found it? Henry refused to listen to that small voice which whispered while he could.

"Hey," Eric said softly. "Remember me?" He reached up with his hand to gently grasp Henry's chin. "Would you rather not dance?"

"You must be kidding. Not when I'm with the most handsome guy on the dance floor."

"You're worried about Neal," Eric said, not fooled for an instant. "Is he in trouble?"

"I hope not." Eric was too good at reading him. He found it a little scary . . . and reassuring. Henry refocused on Eric. Those walls he'd erected to shield Eric from his messes were developing cracks. Time to spackle them over.

**WCWCWCWCWCWCWCWCWCWC**

On Monday morning, Neal sauntered into the Federal Building an hour late. On the way, he'd stopped to pick up a cup of coffee from the local java hut. He also bought one for Peter, as well as one of those bear claw pastries he liked. And naturally Peter would want Neal to have an almond croissant.

Over pastries Neal planned to fill him in on the film. He along with Henry, Sara, Aidan, Mozzie, and Richard had spent most of the weekend in the warehouse for the making of *Pirates from Beyond*.

Mozzie's script had them start in France. Henry, Neal, and Sara were undercover agents who'd been posing as members of the SS. They supervised the loading of the looted masterpieces onto the U-boat at the Nazi submarine base in Bordeaux. Before the real crew could board the U-boat, the daring band hijacked the vessel and sped off through the murky waters of the Atlantic.
Had Sara added the passionate scene to Mozzie's script? Neal wasn't about to complain. Not after Thursday night. It gave them a chance to kiss and then laugh it off afterward. Henry hadn't said a word about spotting Neal at Riffs.

It was for the best Henry hadn't returned to the club the following evening when Neal was there with Bianka. That wasn't nearly as pleasurable. Bianka, the innocent exchange student, was no more. Luckily, he'd already planned to spend most of the time performing songs. She sent him numerous signals that she didn't want the night to end at Riffs, but he pretended to misread them. She didn't know it yet, but that was the last date they'd ever have. He was already preparing his list of excuses.

Neal got off the elevator and paused to check the bullpen before entering. He'd texted Hughes he was on his way, and the special agent in charge was already in position—standing on the balcony and scowling at Neal's desk. Neal waited to enter till Hughes demanded to know where he was.

"Right here, sir," he said with a disarming grin while accentuating his swagger. "How may I be of assistance?"

"You can put in some honest labor for a change," Hughes retorted, giving him a look which normally would have frozen him in his tracks, but not Neal the slacker. Hughes pointed to a mountain of files piled high on Neal's desk. "I want those all classified and filed this morning or there'll be hell to pay."

After Hughes stomped back to his office and slammed the door, Neal headed upstairs with the pastries. The file vault could wait. He was, however, beginning to sense a flaw to the plan. Much as he enjoyed flouting the rules, Hughes relished swinging his cudgel just as much.

Later that morning Neal did get around to the files, but only after letting out several loud grumbles about how overworked he was. By the time Peter rescued him from the vault, the mountain was down to a paltry hillock.

"Jones has the recording ready," Peter said. "Care to listen in?"

"Is this the one with Graham?"

He nodded. "He called while you were in here."

They retreated to the testing room off the lab where Jones and Travis were waiting for them. On the recording, Graham expressed his concern that Henry had been withdrawing company funds for his private use.

"Damaging stuff," Travis remarked. "We're lucky Henry works for a private family-run business. It's much easier to lay a paper trail which can then vanish without the company raising the hackles of government watchdogs."

Jones frowned. "How will Diana explain Henry's motivation to Ruiz? Adler knows Neal's bank account is stuffed with money from the sale of the Braque. That's more than enough to pay for the salvage operation."

"But not if Henry and I've been going on shopping sprees," Neal pointed out.

Jones wasn't swayed. "We're talking millions. What kind of shopping are you guys doing?"

"I'd like to know the answer to that as well," Peter added. "We've led Ydrus to believe that Adler is helping you salvage the sub. They probably heard through their contacts that you sold the Braque. News of a sale that large must have sent ripples throughout the black market. They're bound to
Neal reveled in the questions. He'd been surprised they hadn't raised them earlier. "We weren't interested in small stuff and we wanted something that was a natural fit. Henry's already started shopping, and he's careful to wear his tampered watch so the signal goes straight to Adler."

"Shopping for what?" Peter demanded, the steam beginning to come out of his ears.

"A luxury sailing yacht! What else would two pirates shop for? Borrowing Graham's is a drag. He's been raising waves"—he paused to grin when Travis groaned—"while demanding to know what we're doing with his precious boat. We found a sweet model that's a bargain at twenty million dollars and are making inquiries about docking it at a yacht club. The Diamond Point in Brooklyn has a nice ring to it. With the addition of club fees, maintenance costs, etc., there will be hefty expenditures on top of the purchase price."

Jones looked the most envious of the group. "Your own pirate ship! Man, if I tell my nephew, Ethan will want to sign up to be your first mate."

"And I thought I was being extravagant shopping for Ferraris and Lamborghiniis," Peter said. "I bow in front of the master."

"Next team party is on your yacht!" Travis declared. "As well as all future Arkham Files wrap parties."

"You do realize that we're not really buying one, don't you? On the other hand, if you insist. With the forgeries I'm planning, the recovered Nazi loot, yes, I think we could swing it!" No one, not even Jones the bean counter or Peter the used-to-be by-the-book guy, punctured the fantasy. Were they beginning to appreciate that the allure of the con wasn't the money or the stuff, but the rush from the adventure?

"Speaking of forgeries, where do we stand with your Degas masterpiece?" Peter asked.

"Mozzie will list Harlequin and Columbine for sale tomorrow on the dark web. I expect Ydrus will hear about it shortly afterward. They'll research its provenance and quickly learn it's been missing since the war."

Travis frowned. "They might suspect it's a forgery."

"True," Neal conceded. "But that doesn't negate the inference that someone now has access to the treasure. Hagen was selling copies of St. George and the Dragon, using the original as a guide. They may believe it's happening again. Mozzie has also begun to seed the internet conspiracy chat rooms with rumors of U-boat sightings. Expect headlines to appear soon on a tabloid near you."

Peter closed his file folder. "Any concerns? Questions?"

Jones had that clenched look on his face that he always got when he was about to smack you down with some legal issue. "Are we overplaying it? Caffrey's been a good member of the team up to the past few weeks. All this slacker stuff... will it raise a flag with Kramer?"

"I don't think so," Peter replied, "and I hope he hears it from other sources too. It will add to the believability. As to why Neal had such a radical personality shift, any guesses as to what conclusion we want Ydrus to make?"

Travis gestured toward Neal. "The mind games they pulled in Los Angeles are kicking in."
Peter nodded. "We discussed it with Neal's psychologist and he agreed. Rolf and Klaus will likely assume that the memories they implanted are starting to leak through. The doctor responsible for the manipulation, Erasmus Penfold, may cite Neal's recent behavior as proof the procedure worked. A little seepage could be viewed as a positive. Neal's reverting to the thief that Klaus knows so well—cocky, reckless, and irresponsible."

For the rest of the day, Neal did his best to live up to the billing Peter had so thoughtfully outlined for him, spending his time drawing cartoons when he wasn't pestering the other agents. That is, until Richard called. All thoughts of piracy were put on hold when news of the disaster began to filter in.

The change in mood didn't escape Henry's notice when he strolled into the bullpen midafternoon. Plopping unceremoniously into the chair next to Neal's desk, he asked, "What happened? Travis was exiting the lobby when I came in. I called out to him but he didn't hear me. He looked like he was being chased by a dark cloud."

"He has good reason for the gloom. He left early to pick up Richard. The news from New Orleans isn't good. It sounds like Hurricane Katrina devastated the city."

Henry sat up straighter. "Does Richard have family there?"

Neal nodded. "His parents have a small house in the Garden District south of downtown. I'm glad we already finished the photo shoots of Sara as Kate. Richard's plans are up in the air. He wants to go down and help, but he's not sure how he'll be able to get to the city. He and Travis may drive down. I hope you have better news?"

"Not just good. I'm gonna make your day." Henry nodded toward the balcony. "Let's go up and bother your pushover of a boss."

At Neal's knock, Peter barked a rough command to enter. Perhaps no longer quite a pushover? When they entered his office, Peter strode over to the glass wall, a ferocious scowl on his face. "As far as the bullpen is concerned, I called you in to give you a lecture about what Graham reported. I'm making sure Jones knows about it. Hughes is no doubt keeping an eye on the proceedings as well."

"How do you want us to play it?" Neal asked. "Act like smartasses or appear insincerely abject?"

"Let's go for the latter. It will be a pleasant change of pace." Peter turned to Henry. "Does this have anything to do with snakes?"

He nodded, a woebegone look on his face. "Long shots can have large payouts. Sofia and Radha spent the day with the snake-lovers at the symposium. Our mystery woman attended the morning presentations at Fordham University."

"Did they get a name?" Neal asked eagerly.

"Joanna Abbot. And just as important—they got a scent. Sofia reported she was wearing Shalimar, the same perfume Chantal smelled on Klaus's shirt when she suspected him of cheating on her."

"Neal, you were working with Klaus when Chantal found out about it," Peter said. "Assuming it's the same woman and that she's affiliated with Ydrus, this confirms Klaus was working with them as early as 2002."

"Does the name Joanna Abbot mean anything to you?" Henry asked.
"I'll tell you in a minute if Peter will let me check something on his computer."

"Help yourself." Peter stood up so Neal could have his chair. "If the woman is with Ydrus, it's most likely an alias. Did they see the snake tattoo on her finger?"

"Radha caught a glimpse of it. It was almost completely concealed by the ring she was wearing. He wouldn't have guessed it was a tattoo if he hadn't known about it. Sofia said they were able to obtain several photos of her as well. They contacted Diana who was in the art gallery at the university. She's working undercover as a student doing research. Mozzie's been keeping watch outside. I gather his wig is a sight to behold."

During Henry's explanation, Neal's fingers flew over the keyboard. It didn't take long to find the confirmation he was seeking.

"Do you intend to just sit there grinning at the monitor?" Henry demanded.

Neal swiveled around, molding his expression into his professorial look. "I played a hunch. If this woman is Klaus's lover, he might have picked her alias. It would fit his profile. He's a control freak. He gave Chantal and me nicknames. James Whistler was one of Klaus's favorite artists. Whistler had a mistress who served as his muse and model. Her name was Joanna Hiffernan. Later on, she was believed to have married a man with the surname of Abbot."

Henry arched his eyebrows. "He named her after Whistler's mistress? Wait till Tricia hears about that."

"We have a strong case to link her with Klaus," Peter said, "but the connection to Ydrus is thread-thin—we're relying purely on a tattoo and her being seen with Klaus. Much as I'd love to bring her in, the only thing we could question her on is her knowledge of Klaus, and that would reveal we know he's alive. We'll have to let her continue to roam free."

"No need to complain about that," Henry said. "By not revealing we're onto her, we may be able to learn more than we could through questioning. After the morning presentations, a shuttle bus took the symposium participants over to the zoo to tour the reptile house. Sofia and Radha lost track of her there, but we hope she'll return tomorrow for the second day of activities."

WCWCWCWCWCWCWC

"Boss, we have a problem."

Diana's words played in an endless loop in Peter's mind. When she called him from Fordham University, Peter knew—he just knew—that Neal was at the center of it. Diana and Mozzie were spending a second day at the art gallery in the hopes Joanna would return. Their bet had paid off. Joanna was once more among the participants. He should be feeling elated, but instead he was stewing over what the collateral damage would be.

Neal was gone when Diana contacted him. He'd been dispatched on a grunt assignment to deliver evidence to a federal court. Peter texted him to come to his office as soon as he returned.

While he waited, he contacted Henry. Upon hearing the news, Henry requested he be present when Neal was informed. Henry's office was close to the Federal Building and he sped over well before Neal was due back. But Peter's hope that Henry could answer his questions was quickly dashed.

"I knew there was something fishy about her," Henry said, his face grim. "But Neal's been so touchy about his social life that I haven't been able to talk with him about it. How serious do you think he is?"
Peter groaned. "This is Neal, remember. Who can tell what's a tease and what's not? I've seen Bianka a few times when I visited him at his studio. At the end of July, Neal told me he was thinking of dating someone. I suspected it was Bianka. About a week ago I saw them in a passionate embrace on the street at lunch hour—"

Henry cut short a curse. "That confirms it," slapping his hand on the desk.

*Does it?* Peter thought back. He'd joshed Neal about the exhibition he and Bianka had put on. Neal had dismissed the significance. He'd said something to the effect that she was one of many. Was Neal telling him the truth or was he throwing sand in his eyes? He didn't explain one of many *what*. Was that a classic Caffrey deflection? Peter took it to mean one of many women he dated but it could have been one of many people he knew. Neal didn't lie to him but he knew how to skate right to the edge.

"What did Neal tell you?" Henry demanded. "Give me his exact words."

Peter broke off his explanation when he saw Neal outside his door.

When Neal entered, he took one look at Henry and grinned. "Did Graham call to complain about me again?" He closed the door behind him and leaned against it. "What's up?"

"Diana phoned in a report an hour ago," Peter said. "I was bringing Henry up to speed. You better take a seat."

Neal raised an eyebrow, glancing at Henry, but his cousin's expression would only alert him of the gravity of the situation.

"Our mystery woman met someone at the art gallery during the lunch hour." Peter paused for a moment, searching in vain for a delicate way to phrase it. Neal was looking at him eagerly. What would he look like once he heard? "Her name is Bianka Kaldy." Neal's eyes narrowed but he showed no other emotion as Peter described the details of the meeting. "They sat down in a corner alcove. Diana couldn't get close enough to hear the conversation, but it went on for about fifteen minutes. Apparently Joanna was mainly asking questions. Bianka did most of the talking. At the end, Joanna nodded as if in approval.

"Was there any physical contact?" Henry asked.

"Joanna squeezed Bianka's hand briefly when she left. Bianka stayed in the gallery for a few minutes before she too departed. Mozzie followed Joanna back to the symposium. He alerted Sofia and Radha but so far there's been no other interaction."

"Bianka works for Ydrus . . ." Neal took a breath. "We suspected we were being monitored. I should have picked up on her. She arrived on campus in early June." His jaw worked for a moment. "Klaus knew about my art studio. He'd visited me there, met Keiko. He must have described every detail to Rolf."

Neal was right to suspect Klaus. He'd used Leila Bedford to influence him. This was another example. "Do you need a moment?" Peter asked.

"No, I'm fine. It helps to explain some stuff, though. I'd noticed a change in her attitude."

Henry made an impatient gesture. "Peter's the one who's supposed to say 'cut the crap,' but I'll do it for him. We know you were dating her. This has to be tough on you. There's no need to hide the hurt you must be feeling."
Neal looked at Henry, puzzled. "It's not like I'm a delicate flower. We went to a concert, had lunch together. I took her to Riffs a couple of times but I was never interested in her romantically."

"Hah! I saw you two at Riffs Thursday night. You were all over her."

Neal raised a brow. "Are you following me?"

"Don't give me that innocent act. You slipped out deliberately before I could talk to you."

"So you admit you're following me."

Henry glared at him, looking ready to erupt. "Of course not, although I should. You give me no choice."

Peter cut in before words got too heated. "I'd wondered, too. I'd met Bianka. It was a natural assumption to believe she was the one you were interested in dating."

"Both of you can relax. I wasn't with Bianka on Thursday night, but I did take her there on Friday."

"Then who was the woman I saw you with?" asked Henry, clearly upset. Did he believe Neal was misleading him?

Neal crossed his arms, his mouth set into a firm line. "Since you feel it's so important I'll tell you. But don't think this gives you license to check on my dates. I am not wearing my heart on my sleeve. What I do in my private life is just that—private. Understood?" He was directing his words at Henry, not at Peter. How much of this was a game? Was Neal really that upset at Henry or was he blowing smoke in his face?

"I was with a woman named Alicia on Thursday night, and I have no intention of disclosing her last name. We've dated a few times."

Henry wasn't relenting. "That wasn't the impression you gave at Riffs."

Neal smiled it off. "Just because I'm more comfortable with expressing my feelings than you are, don't read too much into it." His expression turned serious. "But Bianka working for Ydrus, that's another matter."

Peter nodded agreement, relieved to turn the spotlight back on her. "She was probably planted at Columbia to spy on you and attempt to win you over by . . . um . . ."

"Seducing me?" Neal shrugged. "She has the looks." He thought a moment. "That shyness and uncertainty about her English must be an act. She was well coached."

"Klaus knew about your relationship with Kate," Peter said. "He planned to give you a replacement."

"Figuring Bianka would make it even easier to control you," Henry added. "She's also their mole."

Peter was watching Neal carefully. He didn't seem depressed by the news, but excited at the opportunity they'd been gifted. That indicated more than anything that he was being truthful. Peter relaxed, comfortable that he wouldn't have to deal with a Kate-proportioned crisis. "You'd mentioned earlier that Bianka's attitude had changed."

Neal nodded. "Up to last week, she wasn't giving me any signals that she was interested in deepening our friendship, and I know I wasn't."
"Have you had a chance to examine her for snake tats?" Henry asked, a mischievous grin on his face. Good. He was relaxing too.

Neal's face lit up. "I haven't found any yet, but I've only seen the clearly visible parts. For the FBI's sake, I really should conduct a more thorough search."

Peter groaned. Was he ready for James Bonds to emerge once more? He felt much more comfortable with Neal the pirate than with Neal the lady killer. And why was that? Tabling that unsettling thought for later pondering, preferably over a beer, he directed the conversation back to the original question. "Last week at lunch was the first time she came on to you?"

Neal nodded. "That was when you saw us on the plaza." He turned to Henry. "Bianka invited me. Over a delicious meal at a French restaurant, she began flirting with me much more strongly than ever before." He paused, a slight smile crossing his face. "She strongly suggested she wanted to explore an intimate relationship."

"Have you seen her since?" Henry asked.

"She wanted to go out last Saturday, but since we were shooting the video, I suggested Friday instead. We went to Riffs. I was curious to see how she'd act. She was much more overt . . ." He finished the thought with a shrug. Neal locked eyes with each of them. "I was not and am not interested in becoming intimate with her. There's too much going on right now. The con"—he winced—"The curse. Trying to pursue a relationship with anyone is a non-starter."

Peter remembered how freaked out Neal had been when Keller resurfaced while he was dating Fiona. It was something both Peter and El had been concerned about. Would Neal ever feel safe enough to enter into a long-term relationship with a woman? And that was before they'd ever heard of Astrena. But for once, Neal's wariness had proved a blessing.

"Has anyone been assigned to look into Bianka's background?" Neal asked.

"Jones is already working on it. He'll also contact Interpol." Peter shot Henry a quick look. Back when Neal had confessed he had the original Braque in his possession and that Henry knew about it, Peter had stipulated that from then on there could be no work-related secrets among them. Would Henry abide by the agreement?

"I doubt Jones will find anything," Henry said, giving Peter a slight nod. "I've already vetted her and didn't find any warning flags."

Neal didn't look surprised, only a little amused. "When did this happen?"

"We assumed Rolf and Klaus were monitoring you when you returned from California," Henry said, not answering him directly. "Bianka has the studio next to you. Diana mentioned that she'd met her and Bianka had asked why you were painting at home rather than your studio. Under the circumstances, it was completely justified."

"I agree," Neal said mildly, "but you could have informed me about your suspicions."

"And me as well. Henry didn't defend his actions, although he easily could have made a case. Neal was seeing a therapist at the time. He was carrying a dump truck of guilt around about the Braque. Both Henry and Neal seemed content to move on, and Peter didn't make an issue of it. He was just relieved to not have to act as a referee.

Neal sprawled back into the chair. "While you investigate, I suppose it's once more up to me to do the heavy lifting. I'll reverse course for the team and allow myself to be seduced." He smiled
expectantly at Peter, challenging him to knock it down and knowing full well that he would.

Peter sighed inwardly. Respite over. "Before you dust off your Don Juan costume, consider for a moment how it would look. Sara's coming in tomorrow to deliver her rant about you to Hughes. You've got a thing going with Kate, and now you intend to make a play for Bianka?"

"Who knew working at the FBI could be so stimulating? I don't see any problem with juggling three women. I've been playing Sara, and that's what she'll tell Hughes. I'm aware of Kate's love for Adler and realize I have no hope of anything lasting with her. Bianka, on the other hand . . ." Neal thought for a moment. "She's been portraying herself as an artist, an innocent student. I can work with that. She's what I yearn for—a vision of purity, unsullied by chicanery and deception. I'm a hopeless romantic, longing for a fair princess in a castle. Bianka represents that."

Was Peter supposed to feel reassured? There was more than a hint of bitterness in Neal's voice.

As if to prove Peter's fears, Neal's expression darkened. "I wonder if it was Klaus or Rolf who chose that name. It means white and shining. She was designed to fit his analysis of my character."

"I'm glad you didn't fall for it," Henry said, pulling him out before he could dwell any further on the Mansfelds. Neal normally didn't put on display the degree of animosity he felt toward them for having manipulated him. It was an anger Peter and Henry shared.

"You were probably worried Bianka was another Kate." Neal shook his head. "I like to think I'd learned from that experience."

"There's still a chance Bianka's not working for Ydrus," Peter reminded them. "Joanna's connection is razor-thin. All we have on her is one photo where she was seen walking with Klaus and a snake tattoo."

"Did you find out where she's staying?" Neal asked.

"Jones discovered she's registered at a nearby Marriott which is serving as the host hotel for the symposium," Peter said. "Agents were in place to search her room when she left for the morning. Nothing incriminating was found but they were able to obtain what they believe are her fingerprints. And before you ask, we've already run them. There are no matches."

"She has reservations to return to London tomorrow," Henry added. He turned to Peter. "I assume the Brits have been notified."

He nodded. "They're already combing through her background."

Neal squared his shoulders. "We all have our assignments. You'll research Joanna while I'll embrace my new assignment." Before Peter could sprinkle a large dose of caution on that remark, he added. "Bianka called me yesterday, pressing for another date. Friday date night coming up!"

"Do you want me to play the cousin with the despicable timing?" Henry asked.

"I have something even better," Peter said. "Van duty—Stifle those groans—This will be the perfect solution."

Henry chuckled. "Our old friend, van duty. Do you despise it as much as ever?"

"Yep," Neal said, making a face.

"Hughes will particularly relish this addition to his overbearing boss duties," Peter said. "Effective
immediately, for the eyes and ears of Ydrus, we're conducting surveillance on a suspect located”—he
thought a moment—"in an apartment building on Central Park West."

Neal looked at him and grinned. "You're making it close to the Museum of Natural History so you
can take a break there."

"And at my favorite deli as well. Why shouldn't I get a few perks too?"

"I'll build up a reserve of excuses," Neal said. "I wouldn't want to overwork van duty. This is one
romance which will have a tough time moving out of the starting gate."

Notes: In Sara's fantasy scenario for Neal and Kate, I added a nod to the classic canon scene of
Kate and Neal in "Forging Bonds." Neal's distaste for van duty is something Henry is very familiar
with, as readers of Penna Nomen's By the Book can attest.

If you read Dark Rabbit, you know that all is not what it seems at the rock club Riffs. Information is
being funneled to Astrena who likely was not thrilled to hear of Neal's dates. Details on the situation
at the rock club are in this week's blog post: Undercurrents at Riffs.

Next week is the 4th of July. In Caffrey Conversation, there are two stories which reference
Independence Day. In 2004, Neal celebrated it with Sara in Baltimore. (Caffrey Disclosure:
Chapters 18-19). In 2005, Neal attended a party at the Burkes (Nocturne in Black and Gold:
Chapter 2). In Chapter 10: Spiders, which I'll post next Wednesday, there will be fireworks of a
different sort.

I'm grateful to all of you who leave comments, kudos, and reviews. It's been delightful to hear about
the connections some of you have to elements in the plot. One reader wrote about being familiar
with the Brooklyn Navy Yard. Another has ancestors who were lighthouse keepers. Thanks for
sharing!

Blog: Penna Nomen & Silbrith Conversation: www.pennasilbrithconversation.blogspot.com
Chapter Visuals and Music: The Harlequin's Shadow board on the Caffrey Conversation Pinterest
website: www.pinterest.com/caffreycon
Spiders


Sara tapped the elevator button for the eighteenth floor. It was her first time to visit the Organized Crime floor. Hughes had directed her to go to their video conference room. Ostensibly he’d chosen the location to minimize the risk of Neal spotting her. It would also make Diana's task easier. Ruiz was a member of the Organized Crime team. As special agent in charge, he might have seen the reservation request or a fellow agent could have commented on it. When Diana mentioned Hughes and Kramer working together, Ruiz would have corroborating evidence.

The previous day Hughes met Sara in her office at Sterling-Bosch, where they rehearsed their script. Sara had never worked with Peter's boss before this assignment. He reminded her of Graham Winslow, a man whom she'd discovered hid the heart of a buccaneer beneath a crusty exterior. She suspected Hughes in his younger days had a taste for being a pirate as well.

According to the scenario she and Neal had devised, Sara sneaked into the loft on Sunday evening and caught him and Kate in a compromising situation. She wouldn't share all the details with Hughes—certainly not how Kate grabbed for the sheet while Neal reached for his fedora to cover the crown jewels. Sara imagined herself breathing fire at the sight while trying not to be swept up by what Neal looked like. She was soooo ready for herself and Neal to be the ones in bed.

She shook herself. Back to the task at hand. Neal had slipped on a silk robe and escorted Sara onto the terrace while Kate dressed. He told her he hadn't enjoyed a minute of it—hah!—but Kate demanded his attention. Neal pleaded that since Kate controlled Adler's purse strings, he had no choice but to satisfy her.

Sara would tell Kramer that eventually—after much persuading and professions of love by Neal—she'd pretended to accept his story. Neal spent Monday night with her trying to convince her that his passion for her was real. Yet another scene Sara intended to gloss over.

Was there anything better than make-up sex? Sara sighed inwardly. Or any kind of sex with Neal?

She clamped down on her hormones and reviewed her script as she rode the elevator up. She'd spare Kramer and Hughes the salacious details but let them know in no uncertain terms that Neal's body might have been up to the challenge but his heart wasn't. A woman can always tell.

Sara would inform Kramer she acted as if she hadn't noticed anything different, and Neal suspected nothing. But that night, she'd had it. As far as Sterling-Bosch was concerned, Sara was acting undercover—often literally—for their benefit. Henry and Mozzie thought Neal had seduced Sara in order to obtain her company's list of clients and they'd believe he was succeeding. But she was now a woman scorned. It was with great satisfaction that she'd take her revenge on all of them, and especially Neal.

Hughes was waiting for her at the elevator bank on the eighteenth floor. They lingered to talk before moving into the video conference room.

"Is Ruiz around?" she murmured.

He nodded. "I came down early to inspect the equipment for the video conference. Travis is handling the transmission." Video conferencing was not available at Sterling-Bosch yet. This would be Sara's first experience using the system.
"Diana told me Ruiz has asked her out to lunch today."

His lips twitched with a soft snort. There was a mischievous gleam in his eye which reminded her of Graham. It made her wonder if he had grandchildren he could tease. "He's itching for the latest dirt. I'd reserved the room yesterday afternoon after returning from Sterling-Bosch. He must have found out." He led her down the hallway to the small conference room.

Travis was testing the signal when they walked in. "The equipment's cleared for your use, sir, whenever you're ready."

Hughes grunted acknowledgment. "Find any bugs?"

He nodded. "There was one under the table. It's been deactivated, and I've already tested the room for signal interference. An encryption program will run during the conference to prevent the feed from being hacked."

Draconian measures for extraordinary times. Sara would be informing Kramer about Kate's involvement with Neal. It was vital for the con that Adler learned nothing about it.

Hughes and Sara sat side by side facing the camera. The feed from D.C. was displayed on a wall-mounted monitor. Sara had never met Kramer. His mild folksy manner made it difficult to believe he was up to his neck in subterfuge.

In his introductory remarks, Kramer was profuse in his appreciation for Sara's actions. "This must be very difficult for you. You used to work on Henry's team at Win-Win. You were a personal friend to Neal."

"Thank you for understanding, sir. It gives me no pleasure, but once I discovered Neal's history, I realized that this day would come." It galled Sara to see Kramer nod approvingly. She was using the same lines on him that he'd argued to Peter and was stroking his ego in the process. "Mr. Bosch asked me in March if I'd be comfortable spying on Neal. We talked it through and I recognized it was the right thing to do. When I heard that you'd flagged Neal as a person of interest after the theft of the Raphael painting in D.C., I knew my duty was clear. Neal is an expert con artist and thief. He has no need for firearms because his charm makes him an even more dangerous enemy. Against such an opponent I was the best candidate."

Hughes turned to face her. "We owe you a debt of gratitude for your assistance."

"This is what I do," Sara said simply.

Hughes had already sent Kramer the photos of Neal and Kate that Jones had taken, as well as a copy of the video Sara had given Hughes the previous morning. Yesterday was the first day Kramer had heard about the U-boat. Hughes had filled him in on the scheme which was supposedly based on the evidence Sara had provided.

Kramer barked a short laugh. "I still find it incredible that they actually salvaged a U-boat. Clearly they're smart guys. Why on God's earth would they be idiotic enough to make a birthday video with the loot?"

Sara sighed deeply, adding emphasis to display the degree to which she was fed up with Neal's games. "You have to understand, sir, Neal and Henry don't think like normal people. I've been cozying up to Neal since March, gradually stripping off his layers of distrust. Henry and Neal are two peas in a pod. They'd do anything for each other. Unknowingly, they played right into my hands. As an example, Henry decided last summer I'd be the perfect match for Neal. That made my
task that much simpler." Kramer could infer what he liked. Had she actually fallen for Neal or had she simply pretended to? He likely believed she'd convinced herself of the latter.

Travis flicked her a quick glance at her last remark. Did he suspect that bit was true? She'd adlibbed the comment. "The two of them have been operating scams since they were teenagers. It's become second nature. I could go on about the lack of positive father figures when they were growing up, but what's the point? They're been at it so long that they're beyond redemption." She allowed a little bitterness to drip into her voice. It wouldn't have been believable otherwise. Neal and Henry were too charming for her not to feel any remorse.

Kramer appeared to believe her. She took a drink of water as if to calm her nerves and acted relieved to let Hughes take over.

"Caffrey and Winslow have been designing elaborate birthdays for each other for years. As I mentioned yesterday, Graham Winslow contacted me, concerned about the negative influence Caffrey was having on his grandson. I've been leading him to believe that we feel Neal is the ringleader. That way he's been forthcoming with the evidence he's discovered."

"Smart move," Kramer acknowledged. "Do you intend to give Henry immunity?"

Hughes snorted his contempt for the idea. "Hardly, but he may wind up with a reduced sentence. We want to maintain good relations with Winston-Winslow. I'm willing to go easy on a grandson who up to now was on the path to becoming CEO."

Kramer nodded. "I agree. Caffrey is the rot which must be eradicated. If it weren't for him, Henry wouldn't have turned. Henry's mother is on the board of directors. His grandfather is the former CEO. Both of them will be much more favorably inclined to the Bureau if we exercise restraint. Henry's indiscretions up to the present instance have been minor. There's a good chance he can be rehabilitated. It pains me to say it, but Caffrey is not salvageable. Incarceration is the only solution."

"We'll need hard evidence to convince Peter, though," Hughes warned. He turned to Sara. "Don't take this the wrong way, but nothing you've told us is convincing evidence. For all we know, Caffrey and Winslow could have been playing an elaborate prank on you. You haven't seen any of the art."

"Reese is right," Kramer added. "You were blindfolded when they took you to the warehouse. You don't know where it is. We have to catch them with the art."

"Or sell one of the works," she pointed out.

"Do you have proof?" Kramer demanded. If he were a spaniel, he'd be pointing.

"I think I can obtain it," she said. "They've been working with a Nazi shipping manifest Neal stole from a home on Long Island last winter. The manifest lists several of the missing paintings which were on the U-boat." The actual manifest had been in White Collar's possession since February, but it had never been shared with D.C. Art Crimes.

"Can you get a copy of the manifest?"

"I believe I can, and not only that. Earlier this week Neal decided to sell one of the paintings—a work by Degas called Harlequin and Columbine. It's on the list."

Kramer frowned. "Caffrey's not stupid. Why would he make such a rash move? You said Winslow made the deal with Adler when he was in Argentina last month. Adler's providing the funds for the salvage. This doesn't make sense."
"There's something we're missing," Hughes agreed, chiming in on cue. "Graham reported he was first alerted to the gravity of the situation when Henry started doctoring the company books. I can see where Winslow might have needed a bridge sum but the funds should be flowing now."

Sara shook her head. "You don't understand Neal and Henry. They never grew up. Now they're kids in a toy store and they want it all." Crossing her arms on the table to lean forward, she added conspiratorially, "And I have the proof."

**WCWCWCWCWCWCWC**

"I wish you could have seen Kramer's expression when I mentioned the sailing yacht," Sara said. "He looked like one of those fish with the big bulging eyes."

"Pufferfish?" Neal suggested helpfully. "Or perhaps one with sunken cheeks." He made smacking sounds over the phone. Sara laughed as she pictured him making a fish face.

"From now on, Kramer shall be known as Pufferfish Phil."

When she returned to her office at Sterling-Bosch, she texted Neal to call her when it was safe to talk. She'd picked up a salad on the way back to work for lunch and was eating it when he called.

"I'll be able to judge for myself," Neal said. "I'm sure Travis will want me to watch the feed, but I'll have to wait till tomorrow. I'm stuck on van duty all day today. Badillo finally took pity on me and let me take a lunch break. For now, I'll just have to imagine Kramer's smug smirk when you praised him for making me a person of interest."

Neal might think reviewing the video was a good idea, but not her. She had no desire for him to watch her trashing him. But if she objected, he might misread it and think she wasn't confident in their relationship. Sara restrained herself to a caution. "Hughes and I were piling on the manure with a shovel. Wear your armor when you listen."

"Thanks for the warning," he said, chuckling. "If it gets too bad, I can console myself with Bianka."

She winced. Unknowingly he'd just retaliated in advance. "Have you talked with her?"

"Yesterday. We're going out tonight."

"Someplace public, I hope?"

"You're not worried, are you?"

"Of course not, but you mentioned she was aggressive. I wouldn't want a valuable team member to wind up with battle scars."

"Relax. We're meeting at a restaurant. I've already made arrangements with Henry for a rescue call."

"Who else do you have on your phone bank of saviors?"

"Peter, El, June, the other team members. In addition, Richard and Aidan have volunteered. The Three Musketeers are ready for another adventure. Since they're both at Columbia in the evening, I can count on them to drop in at the most inconvenient times. Aidan's been itching for an excuse to schedule more fencing practice."

Neal had told her how Richard and Aidan had pitched in during Fowler's frame attempt last autumn. She was feeling better by the moment.
"I also told my cousin Angela. She'll likely see me and Bianka on campus and wonder what's happening. She and her boyfriend Michael offered to help. Mozzie and his pet rat Percy can always be called on for an emergency lift. I can guarantee I'll be a frustrated lover."

Sara cringed at the term, and before she embarrassed herself, switched topics. "I saw Diana briefly. She's having lunch with Ruiz. The script has her meeting with Jones beforehand in the file vault to discuss your criminal ways. Hughes had relayed my evidence to Jones who considered it his duty to warn her about you. Diana said she played the loyal team member, skeptical of your duplicity. That's when he told her about the Degas. I expect Adler will be hearing about it shortly."

"I'm glad you told me. I'll know the cause when my ears turn scarlet."

She smiled. "You better get back to that plum assignment before someone else steals it away."

Ending the call, she reached into her desk drawer for the file on the antique gallery theft—her current Sterling-Bosch assignment. But after a few minutes it was obvious that stolen silver wouldn't provide much solace. Sara retreated to the breakroom to make a cup of tea. She needed herbal soothing. Being a fake girlfriend had its thrills. Pretending to be Kate had been surprisingly passionate, although she'd worried how much of it was due to her resemblance to Kate. Neal said it wasn't, but was he just being kind?

Their chemistry at Riffs was undeniable, but she'd been masquerading as Alicia. How much of Neal's interest in her was due to the game they'd invented? Once the game stopped, what then?

The flaw in their Clueless con was that there was too much role-playing. Did he think of her as Alicia or Miss Scarlet? When was there time for Sara?

Now Neal was supposed to seduce another woman. And not just any random coed. Sara had seen Bianka. The woman could have stepped off the cover of *Cosmopolitan*. She exuded sexuality out of every pore. Neal's trouble was he was too good a shapeshifter. How far would he go? He wouldn't want to, of course, or not much . . . But still . . . Shouldn't they be allowed to have three dates before he had to pretend to be in love with yet another woman?

Sara hadn't given Fiona enough credit for how well she'd handled seeing Neal and Raquel together at the Met Museum. Sure it was a con, but it was a damned good one. The two of them kissing in the Hatshepsut gallery . . . Neal gazing passionately at Raquel. Her smoldering eyes could have set papyrus on fire. Fiona had been shocked, stunned, and furious. It hadn't been easy for Sara to talk her down from impaling Neal with one of those ceremonial spears on the wall. At the time, Sara thought that Fiona would easily recognize Neal and Raquel had staged the performance. He didn't know that she and Fiona were there. It wasn't his fault. Rationally speaking, Neal was perfectly justified, but that meant little to Fiona. Back then Neal was corralled in Sara's friend zone. She didn't permit herself to think about him romantically. If he pulled the same trick on her now . . . but that's exactly what he was about to do.

This time it was even worse. Raquel had known it was a con. She was an old friend of Neal's. Bianka was on the prowl, no doubt salivating at having her way with him. A trained seductress eager to take possession of Neal and make him her slave.

And now Neal had a goddess with her hooks into him too. Wouldn't that make him want to get as much pleasure as he could out of life? Bianka was a black widow spider. Sara knew it.

Why hadn't she told Neal to include her in his list of excuse-providers? She was much more dependable than anyone else. Would Neal tell her what went on during the dates? Hardly. He'd want to shield her. Maybe he'd be embarrassed. She knew he wouldn't want to give into Bianka's charms,
but sometimes black widow spiders struck their victims before they had a chance to resist.

Damn . . . damn . . . damn . . .

WCWCWCWCWCWCWCWC

"What do you know about Alicia?" Henry demanded.

El held the phone away from her face to take a deep breath. She and her assistant Yvonne were supposed to be making the final touches for the reception that evening at the Cecile Art Gallery. Not on the agenda was conducting an emergency matchmaker consultation.

El took a moment to survey the gallery. Mozzie's girlfriend Janet had held a costume exhibition here last winter and had recommended her to the owner. She'd already managed two events for the gallery which in turn sparked additional referrals. Combining her love for art with her event-planning business was a long cherished dream. Not even matchmaking was as important.

But everything seemed to be on track. Maggie Feng from the Aloha Emporium was setting out living orchid arrangements among the sculptures. Chef Jacques from La Palette wasn't due to arrive for a half-hour.

Yvonne nodded at her and gestured toward a chair in the corner. Mouthing a silent thank you, El retreated to talk with her indignant conspiracy partner.

"I've never heard Neal mention her," she admitted. "When Peter told me about Bianka and Neal's date with Alicia, I asked Peter if he knew anything about her."

"Did he seem suspicious of the question?"

El chuckled. "He would have been if I hadn't asked. Peter teases me about how protective I am of Neal. Now that Bianka appears to be an evil schemer, naturally I'd be concerned."

"Exactly."

El heard a hollow staccato thumping and smiled. Peter had told her about Henry's Zen huddle room at his office. It was soundproof and contained Indian hand drums on the table. By the sound of Henry's drumbeat, he should spend more meditation time there.

"How do we know if Alicia is any better?" Henry said between thumps. "We're running a double con. We could be challenged on multiple fronts. Is Alicia Adler's agent? Her name starts with an A."

"As does Azathoth," she agreed, "but don't you think it's premature to brand anyone whose name starts with an A as a villain? What would that make of your cousin Angela?"

"There are dark forces at work," he growled, not apparently swayed.

"Have you learned anything more about Bianka?"

"Nothing new. She's an orphan. Grew up with foster parents. It's difficult to question her friends because we don't want to alert anyone we're onto her. The woman she was with, Joanna Abbot, is thirty-six according to her passport. That makes her thirteen years older."

"Another A?"

"You're right. That's more evidence against her. Neal thinks Klaus picked the alias. Was he referencing Azathoth? Now I'm seeing Azathoth everywhere I look." The thumps became even more
"Have you learned anything more about Joanna?"

"Her credentials are impeccable. She's a buyer for a large antique gallery in London. Since her business involves frequent travel, it's possible she leads a second life, but we have no proof of it so far. Hobhouse has ordered surveillance on her house."

"Peter showed me the photos Diana took. In a normal case, Peter wouldn't have shared the evidence. But since the Mansfelds had targeted family members and friends, the White Collar team members had been given permission to alert their significant others. "There was something about the eyes which reminded me of Bianka's photo. You know that Tricia's husband, Mitch, is an anthropologist?"

"Yeah, did Tricia ask him for an opinion?"

"She did. Mitch agreed there were similarities in the bone structure which suggest they could be related."

"Cousins perhaps or even sisters. Win-Win doesn't have any contacts in Hungary and our facial recognition software is only being used by France on the continent. I wish I knew what nationality Alicia was."

Again with Alicia. Did he have a new obsession? Was that what Neal expected? Surely he realized that by not confiding in Henry, he only served to egg him on. Was that what Neal wanted? The cousins did enjoy pranking each other.

"Alex! That has to be it!" Henry gave a sharp rap to the drum.

"Who's Alex?"

"Someone Neal dated a while ago." His voice trailed off for a moment. "I don't know much about her. Neal only mentioned her a couple of times. I think he met her in Europe. He could be using Alicia as an alias for Alex."

Henry exhaled, the sound muffling the drum taps. "Tomorrow we're scheduled to reshoot some of the scenes for the video. I may know more then, but I'm about ready to toss in the matchmaking towel. The way Neal was kissing Alicia, I don't know why I bother."

"When Neal was working undercover with Keller, he was obsessed over Fiona's safety. From what you've said, he's not concerned about Sara's participation. Does that mean she's not his type?"

"He could have more confidence in her, but you bring up a good point. With Adler and Ydrus circling the waters, even if Neal were interested in Sara, he might not try to date her. On top of everything else, he has that curse weighing on his mind. There doesn't seem to be any point to continue the conspiracy."

"I think it's too soon to decide. Both Neal and Sara have sent in suggestions for their characters in Diana's next story. From what she's shared with me, they want to see the romance between Arkham Neal and Sara continued."

"Huh." For a minute all El heard was the sporadic tapping of the drum. Otherwise she might have wondered if her phone had dropped the signal.

"Is Neal living vicariously for what he can't have?" Henry suggested when he came back on the line.
"There may be hope, after all. He's playing the field for now because he has no choice. Once the con is over and if he can just free himself from that curse, he'll seek Sara out."

"By then it may be too late," El warned. "Don't forget Sara's seeing someone else."

"Yeah, but it might not last. Matthew could turn out to be another Bryan. It's also possible she senses Neal's not interested in dating anyone seriously but doesn't want to give up on him."

"Have you ever considered that she may have invented Matthew to keep the pressure off Neal?" El asked. "That's what I might do in her situation."

Silence on the other end indicated Henry hadn't factored in the possibility. When he came back on, his tone was jubilant. "I bet you're right! Matthew is simply a smokescreen so Neal won't bolt. We have to be careful not to reveal we suspect anything. I'll work on this overnight and call you tomorrow with a fresh game plan."

El smiled. Was Henry driving Eric crazy with his machinations? Did Eric even know about it? "Neal's coming to our house for Labor Day. Peter plans to fire up the grill. Barbecue ribs are on the menu. Why don't you and Eric join us?"

"Thanks, but Eric's parents have asked us over."

"Have they already met you?"

"This will be the first time. It will be a large family gathering with Eric's siblings, uncles, their kids . . . I gather his family is almost as large as the Winslow clan. And you don't need to say it. That's what I should be stressing about, not Neal."

At least he admitted it.

**Adler's Villa on the Albanian Riviera. Thursday, September 1.**

"Madam, should I delay dinner?"

Kate glanced at the closed study door. Garrett had already been closeted with Vincent for over half an hour, but there was no sign of their discussion drawing to a close. She turned to Teodor. "Yes, that would be best. Please tell Irina to wait an hour before serving."

"Very good, madam." Teodor bowed stiffly and retreated.

Teodor with his starched shirts and suits was an old-school butler. He made no attempt to disguise his sniff of disapproval at dinner being delayed. But Vincent liked the idea of a majordomo to run the household. And the fact that Teodor also commanded their bodyguards with the discipline of Patton didn't hurt.

Kate relaxed into the chaise lounge and resumed reading *Vogue Italia*. Vincent had promised her they could go to Fashion Week in Milan this year . . .

She'd just finished writing a note about one of Alberta Ferretti's designs when Garrett opened the door. "Would you like to join us?" He looked as pleased as when he'd returned home with the Braque. Kate's mind leaped ahead to guess the cause. Did they have verification of the U-boat?

Vincent was sitting at his desk in the study. The contemporary Italian piece was a recent acquisition which Kate had purchased in Rome. Julius Caesar couldn't have looked more triumphant.
Kate took a seat in the olive leather barrel chair by the picture window while Garrett filled her in on Ruiz's report. Not only had Neal and Henry recovered the sub but they'd already started to sell off the art. The speed at which they were working was breathtaking. Kate imagined what Neal must have looked like when he pried open the hatch and found all those crates of priceless art. How she wished she could have been present!

"We can't wait any longer," Vincent declared. "Ruiz's snitch found out that the head of Art Crimes, Philip Kramer, will be in New York next week. They aim to raid the warehouse and catch Neal and Henry red-handed." He explained about an insurance agent who was spying on the cousins.

Kate had a moment of pity for Neal. He was being played yet again. When would he ever learn? Was it his tragic flaw that he never would? She derived no pleasure from the way she'd manipulated him for Vincent's sake. She liked her sweet-talking con man. They made quite a team. They could be again, if she could only convince him. She'd first have to reignite his ardor, but as smitten as he'd been with her before, she was confident she'd be able to win him over.

Vincent and Garrett disagreed over which one of the cousins to abduct. Kate's preference was for Neal, but Vincent was inclined to snatch Henry. He was confident that Neal had only given his cousin the minimum of information, so Henry would make a better hostage. More to the point in Kate's mind was that Vincent felt more comfortable working with Neal than Henry. He believed Neal still held him in high regard even though Vincent had absconded with practically all of Neal's savings.

Vincent suspected that his action had only made Neal respect him more and perhaps he was right. After all, Neal was attempting to run a long con on him at the time. Vincent simply demonstrated who the superior player was. Kate had wondered if the Braque payment he'd made to Neal was an advance—meant to soften the sting and prime him for a future offer. Whether or not she was right, she could make a case for it.

She'd need to convince Neal that Vincent was doing him a favor. If he'd only let Vincent take the art off his hands, Neal would be rewarded handsomely. He could continue to live in New York—even work at the FBI if that's what he wanted—while being subsidized by Vincent.

Garrett would leave for New York in a couple of days. He already had his people on call. Kate could tell Vincent longed to return to New York with him. For the necessary security arrangements to be ready on time, he'd have to decide soon.

Notes: Sara is particularly sensitive to the female villains targeting Neal. She has to pretend to be one herself. Sara is the subject of this week's blog post: "Sara's Dilemma." There are a few echoes in this chapter to the canon version of Sara who testified against Neal during his trial. Fortunately, this time it's a con. Meanwhile, Kate's conning herself as she fantasizes about her future life with Neal back working for Adler. Henry suspects Neal may be conning him about Alicia, but he doesn't have anything to go on. Progress will be made on many fronts in next week's chapter: Along the Gumdrop Path.

Blog: Penna Nomen & Silbrith Conversation: www.pennasilbrithconversation.blogspot.com
Chapter Visuals and Music: The Harlequin's Shadow board on the Caffrey Conversation Pinterest website: www.pinterest.com/caffreycon
Neal heard the murmur of voices when he unlocked the front door of June's mansion.

"We're in the game room," Mozzie called out as Neal tossed his fedora onto the newel of the staircase.

"Music room, please!" June quickly corrected.

Ever since June had offered Mozzie the use of a corner of her music room for a game niche, it had become a running battle over what to call the space. The once small nook now threatened to swallow the entire chamber. The latest addition was a poker table which had been installed in front of the grand piano. Mozzie's original niche was reserved for video games. Sheet music was forced to share the bookcase with gaming paraphernalia.

Neal found Mozzie and June sitting at the poker table with a game board in front of them. Tonight had been reserved for a classic: *Candy Land*. The wine of choice was a South African Pinotage.

Neal slung off his jacket. "Reporting for duty. If you'll tell me which sink sprang the leak, I'll hop to it."

Mozzie's hand hovered over a red gingerbread man marker. "Did we catch you at an inopportune moment? We'll need a full account. Extra points for diagrams."

"Help yourself to wine first, dear," June said. "And Mozzie, don't attempt to move your figure out of Molasses Swamp. I've already noted your position."

Neal poured himself a glass and sat down at the table. He surveyed the game board for a moment. "Bianka and I had a delightful excursion to the Peppermint Forest but our time in the Ice Cream Sea was severely curtailed when I received your emergency call about the plumbing disaster. Bianka was quite solicitous, especially when I mentioned the valuable antiques which were threatened with inundation."

"And which Peppermint Forest did you pick to wine and dine the fair but treacherous Bianka?" Mozzie asked.

"La Grenouille. Suffice it to say, she was impressed." That was an understatement. The Upper East Side establishment was one of the top French restaurants in Manhattan, both in terms of the quality of the cuisine and the costliness. During the halcyon days with Adler, he and Kate had often dined there. Raquel Laroque had selected it for an intimate dinner with him in February. The restaurant had become his preferred location for dangerous liaisons. He hadn't realized at the time Kate was playing him. With Raquel, they were pretending to flirt for Keller's benefit. Now it was Bianka's turn.

After all the practice he'd had, Neal could easily be awarded a doctorate in flirtation. Bianka thought she was conning him but he'd turned the tables on her. He was no longer the same innocent kid Klaus remembered, and the day would come when his adversary realized it.

"Up to now you'd only gone to rock clubs or the occasional concert," June said. "Didn't she wonder at the extravagance?"

"I told her it was a celebration for all the painting we'd done over the summer. Classes will begin
next week.” He chuckled. "I didn't have to work very hard. She accepted the invitation readily. I'm sure she'll give a full report on the prices. La Grenouille will be further proof of what a spendthrift I've become."

"It was an excellent choice," Mozzie said. "Klaus is a connoisseur of fine food. He'll appreciate the setting. The banquette seating, the soft lights, the fresh flowers, the art on the walls—what better ambiance for l’amour?"

"And Bianka took full advantage of it. She invited me to her apartment afterward. It was the first time I'd seen it. She has a small studio in a grad student building off Amsterdam Avenue. She put on music, we sat on her couch . . ." He let a shrug convey the rest. "Then June called."

Mozzie leaned forward. "First base? Second base? Home run?"

"Let's just say, she's eager for more."

"This weekend?" June asked.

"We discussed it. Columbia's arranged a weekend retreat for the foreign students at the Greenkill Retreat Center in upstate New York. She'd already signed up to go. I was a martyr and urged her not to change her plans while lamenting how jealous I'd be if anyone tried to ask her out."

"You and your wicked games," June said, shaking her head. "You better be careful."

"Are you familiar with 'Wicked Game' by Chris Isaak? It should be our theme song." Neal walked over to the piano. He'd never improvised on the melody, but it fit his mood. Bianka was good. Too good. He'd flirted with women often enough but never seduced anyone for an ulterior motive. That's what she was attempting to do, and he had to reciprocate.

He'd already determined how far he was prepared to go and didn't expect any issues. As he made bolder moves, he sensed a slight hesitation on her part. Had she been conscripted into service? Did Rolf and Klaus have some hold on her?

Controlling the game would be a delicate balancing act. He did like her. He'd had his share of extenuating circumstances. She might have as well. Bianka had traveled extensively in Europe. They'd compared notes on favorite museums. She'd confided a love for Renaissance art similar to his. Sometimes she appeared genuine in her emotions, but portraying herself as a femme fatale was not her strong suit. Whenever she attempted it, she appeared hard and insincere. It was a major turnoff.

He'd been curious to see what clues her apartment would offer, and there weren't many. It was typical student housing—a mix of cheap university-supplied furniture and a few accessories which looked like they'd come from thrift stores. Bianka had a scholarship for Columbia, but her own resources were supposedly limited. Displayed on the walls were several drawings—copies she'd made of works by Italian Renaissance masters. Neal wondered if she was a forger. He should mention it to Peter. He'd also report on the bug detector he'd found hidden in her bathroom. That eliminated the possibility of using surveillance devices on her.

If Sara hadn't come back in his life and if they hadn't photographed Bianka with Joanna, what would he be feeling now? Neal didn't want to think about it.

His hands stilled on the piano keys. He might as well call it a night. Mozzie and June were happily chatting about their game, accusing each other of cheating . . . Everyone was cheating these days.

Neal stood up and drained his glass of the remaining wine. As he turned to leave, Mozzie called out,
"You haven't asked how my day went."

"My apologies for the oversight. Another day of spreading rumors?"

"The evening tabloids carried a fascinating report of a U-boat sighting off the New Jersey coast. Meanwhile here in Gotham, a message has appeared on the dark web that *Harlequin and Columbine* is no longer available for purchase."

"Jones told me that was the plan." According to the scenario the team had devised, Jones acted under Hughes's orders to seize the Degas. Mozzie had fabricated a fence who'd supposedly been arrested and charged with trafficking in stolen property.

"Where is your forgery now?" June asked.

"In the evidence vault downtown. Kramer has requested it be appraised by the Sterling-Bosch fine arts appraiser. I know the expert who'll be assigned. His skills are first rate."

"What if he determines it to be a forgery?" June asked.

"I doubt that will happen, but he could raise flags about the provenance."

"I see that gleam in your eyes," June said with a smile. "You are having fun, aren't you?"

"I never thought I'd be able to paint so many FBI-sanctioned forgeries," Neal admitted.

"They're letting you satisfy your itch legally?"

"Exactly. Kramer's coming to town next week. He'll be at the office on Tuesday and will receive the report then."

"The noose tightens around him," Mozzie said. He picked up his red gingerbread game piece and fingered its neck. "Progress is being made on multiple fronts. I spent another afternoon working on the fractal equations."

"Make any headway?" Neal asked.

Mozzie nodded and set the piece down. "With a slight twist—I deciphered the code."

Neal stared at him, dumbfounded. "Why didn't you say something earlier?"

He shrugged. "It was time to remind you who the master con artist is around here."

Neal resisted the urge to strangle him for not telling him sooner. "I bow before the master in all things. Does Peter know?"

"Of course. He said he'd call Henry. I've also spoken with Travis and Jones."

"You mean I'm the last?" Neal pulled up a chair to sit next to Mozzie. "Please, sir, now?" he implored. "Just a few crumbs?"

"How can you deny Oliver Twist's pleading face?" June said, chuckling.

Mozzie patted him on the head and held out his glass. "I require liquid refreshment if I have to repeat myself."

Neal darted to the sideboard. Based on past behavior, Mozzie would be insufferable for a minimum
of two weeks.

The artful dodger sat back in the chair and launched into a technical description of the decryption analysis he'd employed. Neal was certain he hadn't burdened Peter with the details. Travis probably enjoyed it. For him it was excruciating. After what seemed like an eternity, Mozzie got to the heart of the matter.

"It's the confirmation we'd hoped for. The code spelled out that some of the most prized masterpieces from the Jeu de Paume Museum were placed on a train. It didn't specify which ones but said their destination was the salt mine complex at Altaussee in Austria. The paintings never arrived. Resistance fighters were able to waylay the train by blowing up a bridge shortly before it was due to cross. In the resulting chaos, a daring band of fighters broke into the car and rescued them."

"Where did they take the art?" Neal asked, his heart racing. Did they at last have the key to the solution? When Mozzie grimaced, that hope vanished.

"The letter instructs the recipient to check with Scarbo."

"That's the code name for René, the fighter who Bergmann tortured."

He nodded. "There's no mention of where the theft occurred but it had to be somewhere between Paris and Altaussee. The art was placed on a truck and driven off. It could be anywhere now."

"I wonder how the Nazis got their hands on this letter," June said. "It appears to have been written by one of the fighters who liberated the art. It was meant to be a report, perhaps to their home base."

"During a raid the fighter could have been captured and the letter confiscated," Mozzie hypothesized. "The Nazis likely never knew of its significance."

"René himself could have been carrying it," Neal suggested. "Perhaps it was intended to be placed in a secret depository of files—the Resistance equivalent of a case vault. Peter's motto is 'What lives in the field, lives in the file.' The Resistance leadership could have felt the same way."

"An intriguing possibility," Mozzie allowed. "The vault could have been destroyed during a bombing raid. I've wondered why more examples of the code haven't been found. That could account for it."

"For the past several weeks we've been conning others to believe in the discovery of a lost hoard. I'd begun to have doubts if we'd ever find it," Neal admitted.

Mozzie handed him a copy of the translation to read. "Our hopes have been rekindled. This is a good reminder that we should never lose faith no matter how dim the prospects appear."

Sound advice for his personal situation as well. Astrena's hold seemed insignificant in comparison. Neal had decided to accept Peter's offer to join the FBI two years ago, hoping he could do something worthwhile with his life. The recovery of what Isabelle and René had struggled so hard to safeguard would accomplish that mission.

June roused him from his thoughts when she asked him about the painting he was making for Isabelle.

"I'm using Matisse's Woman with Violin as my inspiration. It's a work which Isabelle said she admired and is one of the missing masterpieces we hope to recover. Isabelle is sitting at the piano. Her son André is standing next to her. On a side table next to the piano is a photograph of her husband. A faint shadowy shape behind the table will be a reference to René." Isabelle had
suggesting including a violin next to the photograph of her husband. It would symbolize the Braque painting. Bergmann had stolen *Violin and Candlestick*. Neal would have to wait to learn if he'd helped himself to the Matisse as well.

The painting was about a third done. He hoped to make significant progress on it over the long weekend. Classes would resume next week. They'd put the dual stings into motion. There'd be little time for extracurricular activities.

Aidan was rushing to complete the first sequences of Henry's movie before the start of the semester. They planned to spend Saturday and Sunday filming in the warehouse.

Neal stood up to go upstairs.

"Don't stay up late painting," Mozzie ordered, reading his mind.

Neal raised an eyebrow. "This coming from a man who usually doesn't go to bed till dawn?"

"But I won't be in front of the cameras. You will." He turned to June. "We're reshooting some of the scenes tomorrow and Richard won't be around to remove dark circles under the eyes."

"What's the latest from New Orleans?" she asked.

"When I called Travis to tell him about the code, he and Richard had just arrived in the Baton Rouge airport. They couldn't get a flight to New Orleans and will rent a car instead."

"I talked with Richard this morning," Neal added. "His parents' house suffered some damage, but they count themselves lucky." He turned to Mozzie. "Richard left makeup supplies with Aidan. Sara can erase any dark circles."

"Good," he said, rubbing his hands. "June has graciously offered me the use of her guest room tonight. I'll be able to review script revisions with you over breakfast. After our morning session with Billy at the Emporium, we'll leave for the warehouse."

The kung fu classes with Billy had evolved into master classes on the art of the cat burglar. Billy had once been an expert thief himself, operating both in Hong Kong and Macao. He walked away from the life at the top of his game. Mozzie told Neal the catalyst had been the death of his wife. He and his only child, Maggie, had gone into business together, opening the Aloha Emporium. Billy owned the building. Their living quarters and orchid grow rooms were on the upper floors.

Billy had studied kung fu as a child in Shanghai. At the same time he'd been instructed in orchid horticulture from his father. He combined the two disciplines in the kung fu technique he'd devised, the Way of the Orchid. Mozzie had been studying with Billy for years. Neal was finally admitted as a student after he returned from California.

As an aid to achieving focus, Neal was sold on the technique. He'd never had any trouble in clearing his head during a job. It was during the down times that he was too often out of control. And now that jobs were few and far between, the need had grown even more apparent.

Billy used the orchid mantis as the embodiment of the Way of the Orchid. The insect mimicked a purple orchid and was able to remain immobile for hours while it lured its prey into a false sense of security.

At times in the classes, Neal felt the world slow down. He could step back, analyze the situation, then make his move while everything else was proceeding at a crawl. It was the same technique which had enabled Billy to become an expert cat burglar. Although the world appeared to be stalling,
in reality it was Billy's movements which had grown lightning fast.

Privately, he told Neal that Mozzie's reflexes weren't fast enough to master the skill. Neal's were, and that was the reason Billy had earlier refused to take him on as a student. He wanted to be absolutely certain Neal had left the old life behind before instructing him in a discipline which would have given him even more mastery.

During their training sessions, Mozzie only participated in some of the movements, claiming he used the technique more for the mental discipline. He'd often sit on a side mat and meditate on one of the orchids Billy brought down during their training sessions. Was the orchid speaking to him or was Mozzie communicating to it? In Mozzie's mind, anything was possible.

Later that morning, Sara met Neal and Mozzie at the Emporium for the drive to the warehouse. Mozzie borrowed a battered cargo van from a friend for the trips. Once Sara was inside, a hood was placed over her head. They were maintaining the fiction that Sara didn't know where the warehouse was. If Kramer asked Sara why the draconian measures were necessary, she was prepared to lay the blame at Mozzie's feet, claiming he didn't trust her.

It was particularly gratifying to Neal that the opposite had happened. Ever since Sara started working with Mozzie on his scripts, the two had become good friends. The con was a welcome reversal of roles for Neal's conspiracy-oriented friend. He could now fabricate a conspiracy theory that he didn't actually believe in.

Henry and Aidan were already there when they arrived at the warehouse. The lights and green screens had been left in place on the soundstage from the previous weekend.

Aidan was floating on a cloud that morning. The Japanese anime company Hotaru had commissioned an expansion of *Yellowface, the Masked Avenger*, based on a script written by Mozzie. Damselfly warriors would now be flying alongside the yellow-faced bees.

While they helped each other with makeup, Aidan filled them in on the different fighting techniques employed by the two species. "Maggie's allowed me to feature her kung fu technique for the damselflies."

"We work with collapsible batons," Sara explained. She reached into her bag and pulled one out. Timeout from makeup chores was called while she demonstrated a few of the moves. Her dexterity with the small jade-green rod was scary, and more than a little hot.

"The bees will continue to use swords as before," Aidan said, "while the damselflies swoop at their foes with batons."

"Are you creating battle formations of marauding bees and damselflies?" Henry teased.

"Like the massive air battalions in war movies?" Aidan grinned. "That may be coming but right now we're focusing on a few individuals that fans can identify with. Maggie let me film her while she demonstrated the technique so I can base the animation sequences off her movements. I also have a video of Keiko and Sara performing simulated combat."

With Henry paying close attention, Neal didn't risk a comment, but that video of Keiko and Sara was crying out to be viewed at the first opportunity.

"Maggie will be credited as an advisor," Mozzie added. "I predict success throughout Asia. The Way of the Orchid could achieve cult status." His eyes glowed with the flame of a new business opportunity. Minor details such as any launch date being far in the future were irrelevant. The orchid
theme of the martial arts technique merged well with Asian cultures. He could be right.

Mozzie was going legit in so many areas—organic honey, wine-making, and now scriptwriting, he wouldn't have much time for his other endeavors. Or not. As Neal watched him show off his own martial arts prowess with a makeup brush, Neal was confident Mozzie would continue to skim a little off the top in whatever scheme captured his fancy.

One of the scenes they reshot was an emotional moment for Neal and Sara as they appeared to be at the precipice of disaster. It was scripted to be a prolonged kiss coupled with a passionate embrace. The scene was also testing their acting skills to the utmost. He and Sara were being directed to appear deeply in love while they simultaneously acted as if their emotions were merely for the cameras—all under the exacting scrutiny of Aidan, Mozzie, and Henry.

They solved the dilemma by teasing each other nonstop between takes. Bianka was a major topic. Neal had been reluctant to bring her up, assuming it might be a sensitive subject, but Sara showed no such restraint. He was relieved to see she wasn't upset by the assignment he'd been dealt.

"Should I compare kissing techniques with her?" Sara asked.

"She's not in your league," Neal assured her. "Have you ever considered giving lessons? I'll sign her up."

"Would you two stop falling out of character," Mozzie scolded. "You're not pals—you're Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman in *Casablanca*! This may be the last time you'll see each other. I want high drama!"

They clinched once more as Aidan directed them to stand in impossible poses with their heads pointing in opposite directions.

"Why are you lying on the floor to shoot us?" Sara asked in a strangled voice. "Won't that distort the effect?"

"Don't move!" Aidan ordered. "If this is to be shown to my professors, it can't be any ordinary film. I intend to make use of fractals for special effects."

Neal groaned. "No more fractals! They've been haunting me ever since I took that course on computational art last winter."

"What did I tell you about moving? Now we'll have to reshoot the frame. And yes, more fractals. You won't see them in the footage for the FBI, but I'll add them later. You shouldn't complain. It was your idea."

"What are you talking about?" Neal muttered as Mozzie seized his head and twisted his chin upward.

Aidan fiddled with the settings on his camera. "You described the memories Rolf and Klaus planted in your head as flashing snapshots. 'Shattered shards of glass,' as I recall. That's what I want to do in the film."

Not a pleasant thought. Neal had no desire to relive the kind of disorientation he'd experienced. Mozzie saw fractals in honeycombs and cave slime. A code made up of fractal equations had tormented them since last February. Travis and Mozzie had tried to find fractal clues in the Braque painting. Diana was even using fractals in Arkham Files. Fractals, not Astrena, were the real curse of his life.

"Keiko's also become interested in fractals," Aidan added, dumping extra salt on the wound. "She
wants to specialize in studio glass this year at Columbia. That course she took in stained glass over the summer inspired her."

Those shards of glass were a painful reminder of the Vermeer trigger waiting in the wings. The team assumed Rolf had delayed implementing his plan while waiting to see what happened with the reported hoard of art. But was that wishful thinking? The psychologist who was working with Neal couldn't provide ironclad assurance that Neal wouldn't be affected by the implanted memories, only that he'd be able to recognize them for what they were.

"You need a break?" Sara asked, concern in her voice.

Neal shook himself mentally to clear the Klaus cobwebs. "No. I'm good." He harnessed his inner Professor Plum persona. "Did I tell you June and Mozzie were playing Candy Land when I returned home yesterday? June had just arrived at the Gingerbread Plum Trees."

"I remember that game," she said happily. "Plumpy was my favorite character. As I recall, he liked to sit under a tree and eat plums."

"June has a book on the characters. Lord Licorice looks particularly dashing in scarlet tights and a matching cape."

Mozzie scowled ferociously. "Bergman and Bogart, remember? NOT Plumpy and Lord Licorice!"

Ydрус Hideout in the Matra Mountains of Hungary. Sunday afternoon.

When Klaus suggested to Rolf they hike in the woods north of the castle, Rolf knew the cause, and it wasn't to search for mushrooms despite the mesh collection bag Klaus had slung over his jacket. Klaus's fondness for adding wild mushrooms to his dishes was well known. It provided a convenient excuse for whenever he wanted to speak with Rolf without the threat of being overheard.

They'd grown increasingly wary of being spied upon, with the fracture of Ydрус into two camps widening steadily. When Anya formed Ydрус, she focused on the arms trade. Huber was part of that operation. The arms crew still provided the muscle and bodyguard assistance.

Four years ago, Anya reached out to Klaus. She wanted a slice of the lucrative art crimes pie, and he was the top player. It was shortly after Rolf had faked his death and was preparing to assume the identity of Alistair Chapman. Despite Klaus's initial reluctance, Rolf argued Anya's offer was too lucrative to turn down. Early on, he sensed her interest in Klaus and encouraged his brother to pursue an intimate relationship. The payout had been better than expected.

Chantal had been a point of concern ever since Klaus married her. She diluted his reliance on Rolf. When Klaus unexpectedly fell in love with Anya, it was a godsend. Their mutual passion smoothed over disagreements on how to run the business. Meanwhile, Anya grew to rely on Rolf's expertise as her admiration for him increased.

Ydрус had provided a useful refuge while Rolf consolidated his vision for the future. But nothing lasts forever.

Base case, art and weapons make unhappy bedfellows. Klaus had grown bored with Anya, a feeling she apparently reciprocated. Ardor had been replaced by spiteful delight in cheating on each other.

Klaus disliked the arms trade. He chafed at the restrictions Anya imposed on him. As for Madame Python, how long would she continue to accept Rolf's guidance? She was already raising issues about the length of time to bring in Neal and Peter.
Rolf wished he could initiate the op immediately too, but for now their plans were on hold. Was Peter conning them about the U-boat or did a cache of art actually exist? They'd soon find out.

Rolf took the lead on a steep trail surrounded by tall firs. The forest was dark and brooding. Lovecraft would have approved. "You have news from Anya?"

Klaus nodded, stopping to examine an ocher-colored bolete. "She's staying on in the States. Kramer reported that Neal placed one of the missing paintings on the black market. A Bureau agent has already confiscated it."

"Which one was it?"

"*Harlequin and Columbine* by Degas—one of the paintings on Huber's shipping manifest."

"A confirmation that they salvaged the U-boat." *Or a masterly gambit by Peter*. Rolf leaned against the trunk of a tree. "Why do you think Neal's selling the art so quickly?"

Klaus smiled. "He has designs on a sailing yacht. From what I hear, he and his cousin like to play at being pirates. They even flew a pirate flag over the sailboat they used."

Rolf chuckled. "That's the kind of attitude we can take advantage of."

"They're not the only ones with expensive tastes. Kramer heard that Peter's in the market for a Ferrari."

Neal flaunting his ability to be above the law was an encouraging sign. Penfold had warned that symptoms of the virtual reality manipulation might start to kick in before the trigger was pulled.

Still to be figured out was why he'd sold the Braque. The most likely explanation was that Peter had found out about it and ordered him to dispose of it. Yet another signal. Peter could have easily arranged for the painting to be donated anonymously. Instead, he allowed Neal to profit off it. How much of a cut had Peter taken from the exorbitant amount Adler paid?

Such a large sum of money only made sense if it was the fee Neal demanded for Adler to become a partner. Peter must know about it.

Klaus paused trimming the mushroom to ask, "What do you make of Peter's actions?"

"He knows we're monitoring him. He's challenged me to make a move." It could be a trap, but either way Rolf yearned to take him up on it. Peter was the key to controlling Neal. Rolf saw in the dynamic many similarities to his own relationship with Klaus.

"Do you think he suspects Kramer?"

"We have no evidence of it. They may wonder about a mole after Bryan McKenzie was unmasked, but Kramer is too highly placed to rouse much suspicion. Hughes wouldn't be consulting with him if he distrusted him. Our unwitting informant, Sara Ellis, is an interesting case."

"She was the one Anya was interested in recruiting," Klaus said, placing the mushroom in his bag. "McKenzie advocated making her an offer. When he was exposed, Anya canceled her plans. Hearing Kramer's report has renewed her interest. Here is a woman who was willing to go undercover and pretend to help Neal and Henry while spying on them."

"Sara's name popped up during our initial surveillance of Neal. That was in the summer of 2004. When the report from McKenzie came in on her, I flagged her as a potential tool to control Neal."
They continued their hike up the path. "What's the report on Huber?" Rolf asked.

"He's in New York, gathering the crew. Anya insists he only use operatives who've previously worked for Ydrus. She's been using the time to visit museums on the East Coast."

"And Kramer?"

Klaus paused by a violet-colored chanterelle. "He leaves for New York Monday evening."

"Good. Once Kramer discovers the location, he'll alert Huber to remove the art. Neal should be grateful for our assistance."

"With nothing to find, the FBI can't charge him with anything," Klaus mused aloud. "He'll be able to remain in place. A potential issue is the evidence Sara is providing."

"Not if we make her the scapegoat. We can plant incriminating evidence that she fabricated the story as revenge on Neal for cheating on her. Besides, what evidence does the FBI have? That he took some sailing trips?" Rolf snorted his disdain for the notion. "Even if Neal's head isn't on straight, he'll have no difficulty in eluding charges. As for the Degas he sold, they only have Sara's testimony that he was involved with it. Our charming Miss Ellis will lose her job, be in disgrace." He shrugged. "She'll be bitter and disillusioned. An easy mark for Anya."

"And the video?"

"A school project. Hitler using a U-boat to store art can easily be dismissed as nonsense. With Kramer to advocate for Neal, he'll land on his feet."

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Notes: Aidan was taking advantage of cutting-edge technology when he chose fractals for visual effects. The movie Doctor Strange made use of the same technique. I've pinned an example to the Pinterest board.

A psychologist might point out that Klaus's desire to control Neal is a result of the way he has been treated by Rolf. In this chapter, Rolf hints that he was indirectly responsible for Klaus and Chantal's breakup. It was at Rolf's urging that Klaus signed up with Ydrus. Has Rolf's manipulation of Klaus been going on so long that Klaus doesn't notice it? Rolf is 12 years older than Klaus and in some aspects has acted more like a father than a brother. I wrote about the dynamic for our blog. The post is called "Twisted Brothers."

Next week in Chapter 12: On Borrowed Time, one of those spiders Sara was worried about launches an attack.

Blog: Penna Nomen & Silbrith Conversation: www.pennasilbrithconversation.blogspot.com
Chapter Visuals and Music: The Harlequin's Shadow board on the Caffrey Conversation Pinterest website: www.pinterest.com/caffreycon

"To another year of classes!" Peter said, raising his wine glass. "In nine months you'll be able to build that brag wall for diplomas."

Neal clinked glasses with Peter and El, happy to toast that long-anticipated event. Classes at Columbia would resume the next day—his first as a doctoral candidate. If he survived the gauntlet, in May he'd receive a dual masters in visual arts and art history plus an additional equivalency diploma for a B.A. Not having a high school diploma would be officially moot.

Peter had grilled ribs outside for a Labor Day picnic. The rain which had been threatening all day held off long enough for them to eat on the patio.

"Did your advisor approve your schedule?" El asked.

He nodded. "Sherkov's only comment was that he was glad he didn't have to pick up the pieces on Thursday. That will be Peter's chore." The Bureau had agreed to a thirty-hour work week during the school year. Neal and some of the other grad students had petitioned to be allowed to cluster their courses on certain days. Neal would spend all day Wednesday in classes, with the remainder of his coursework scheduled for evenings.

Peter arched his eyebrows at that comment. "How bad will the damage be?"

"Sherkov's class on Italian Baroque painters and a monster double period on Impressionism take up the morning. The afternoon will be spent on individually structured seminars on medieval manuscripts and Fauvism. I got a jump start on Impressionism through my forgery of the Degas, but before you send me the reproachful looks, I don't intend to mention that extracurricular activity to the class. Luckily most of my scenes for Henry's movie are already in the can."

"Mozzie requested I be available for filming next week," El said, "but so far he's failed to give me a script. I know very little about the story."

"You could start your explanation with the title," Peter added. "Pirates from Beyond. What's that even supposed to mean? Beyond where?"

Neal rolled his eyes up to the sky, making a circle with his hand. "The Great Beyond, Peter. Space. The final frontier."

Peter chuckled. "I should have known science fiction would sneak in. But won't Diana sue him for plagiarism? Her first Arkham Files story was Visions from Beyond."

"Not likely, since Mozzie was the one who dreamed up that title too. Mozzie's still working on the second half of the script—El, that's probably why you hasn't received anything yet. Henry, Sara, and I are American spies. A Resistance agent alerted us about the Nazis' diabolical plan for the U-boat. Disguised as SS officers, we hijacked the U-boat and its precious cargo. We intended to take the sub to the Brooklyn Navy Yard, but when we entered the Bermuda Triangle—"

"—Don't tell me," Peter interrupted with a groan.

"You guessed it," Neal said with a grin. "The U-boat was sucked into a wormhole and wound up on an alien planet. The only scenes we've filmed so far are in the U-boat."
"Do you know anything about Mozzie's plans for me?" El asked.

"He made vague noises about what a superb space alien you'd make. Aidan is filming the actors separately for the off-world scenes. Then he'll use his tech wizardry to merge the sequences."

"I've always wanted to play a space alien," said El, dreamy-eyed. "I wonder what he has in mind."

"I don't know but Richard's already sketching concept art. I asked Mozz to write a death scene for me. I intend to make that my specialty," he added, ignoring Peter's frown at his choice. "Diana has also been deluging him with unsolicited advice."

El smiled. "Writer's revenge?"

"You got it, and she's not alone. Jones wants him to incorporate references to an episode in Voyage to the Bottom of the Sea which featured Nazis who'd been placed in suspended animation in a sunken U-boat. Travis is campaigning for an homage to a Nazi episode in Star Trek. Mozzie doesn't mind the suggestions. He loves the attention. Henry apparently does as well."

Peter held out a hand as a clap of thunder sounded in the distance. The long delayed raindrops began to pelt down. "Let's move this party to the living room. There's still some wine left for you two, and I intend to help myself to another bottle of Mozzie's excellent honey mead."

El stood up and began collecting plates. "I'm sorry Mozzie and Janet couldn't join us."

"They left yesterday to spend the weekend in the Great Swamp in New Jersey," Neal said, stacking the dishes on a tray.

"They're staying far away from will-o'-wisps I hope," El said, referring to their spring misadventure in South Jersey last spring.

"That as well as anything else demonic. Mozzie knows he can't go off on a tangent. Especially now that we have corroborating evidence of the art."

Peter shook his head as he gathered up the glasses. "Still too many unknowns for my liking. All we know is that the art was taken off a train. The paintings could have been destroyed during a bombing run or some other catastrophe. Isabelle thought Bergmann turned the paintings over to the authorities."

Neal opened the patio door. "Or he could have moved them to another site."

"All you have to go on is that page of code," El commented, "and it had no specifics. How will you possibly be able to trace a location?"

Since they hadn't found any clues in the painting, they were pinning their hopes on Bergmann having hidden instructions somewhere in the chalet where Neal had stolen the painting. Chantal had promised to call Klaus's mother in two days which was Klaus's birthday. If Luisa Mansfeld didn't provide any information, about the only option available would be a house-to-house search of every chalet near Oberammergau. Neal didn't want to consider the likelihood of that being approved.

El still didn't know about Neal's connection to the Braque. While they refilled their glasses and headed for the living room, Peter made vague references to Isabelle searching for additional clues among her friends who served with the Resistance.

Not taking any chances, Neal moved the discussion to their timetable for next week. Kramer would be at the New York office tomorrow. Hughes planned to tell him that his wife Ilsa had met with El.
"I had lunch with her on Friday," El said, explaining their made-up story. "Reese will tell Kramer that during our conversation Ilsa realized I was troubled by something. I appeared to take comfort in being able to confide in her." El released a drawn-out sigh as she shook her head at Peter. "You've been keeping secrets from me. All those calls you've been getting late at night. What can they mean? Noelle wants to talk with you but she won't tell me why. Even Graham's wife Julia is calling you. I'm so confused!"

Neal smiled. "Having fun?"

Her eyes sparkled mischievously. "After all the times Peter's been forced to keep me out of the loop, finally it's my turn to blow smoke in someone else's eyes."

"Kramer will forward the report to Rolf," Peter said. "He's bound to question what my role is. Do I know about the U-boat? Have I been helping you? What's the significance of my sudden interest in sports cars? There are several interpretations, and it will be impossible for him to determine which one it really is."

"He'll discount the tack that Hughes is taking," Neal pointed out. "Hughes has been insisting that you're unaware of the U-boat. He believes you realize Henry's been drawing money from Win-Win but otherwise know nothing about our scheme. But Rolf knows you're far too smart to be conned by me. My bet is he believes you're aware of exactly what Henry and I are up to. Rolf is burning the midnight oil to deduce your angle and how he should respond."

Peter smiled. This was the sort of hypothetical game he loved to play. "I could be in on the scheme, but given my record, it's unlikely. It's much more probable that I'm trying to talk you into doing the right thing. Rather than profiting off the discovery, you should announce it to the world and come off as a hero. As for Henry dipping into the till, I'll let Graham and Noelle handle that one."

"But now Neal has sold the Degas," El objected. "Won't Rolf take that as a sign you've been misled?"

Peter shrugged. "I could have sanctioned it, hon. After the boys' work in finding the U-boat, they deserve a reward. If they want to claim their finder's fee by selling one work . . ." He made a show of stroking his chin for a moment. "Yeah, I'm willing to give them a pass." He turned to El. "I might even see my way to reward you for all you've had to endure through the years. That could be my price for letting Neal and Henry profit off the Degas."

"What do you have in mind?" El asked, her eyes sparkling.

"Neal, wasn't there a Renoir on the list?"

"There was indeed. Madame Chocquet Reading. The woman sitting at a window reading a book could represent El reading one of Diana's stories."

El leaned over to give Peter a kiss. "What a thoughtful present!"

Peter turned to Neal. "You mentioned you were studying the Impressionists this term. Will you have time for a little extracurricular work?"

"Another forgery? Peter, you're spoiling me."

El went to the bookcase and pulled out a book on Renoir. When she found the object of her desire, she gazed at it longingly. "Will I soon have you hanging in our bedroom?"

Neal stood up to refresh his memory on the work. "It hints at the Pointillism of Seurat a decade later."
"I've never forged a Pointillist work."

"I see that gleam in your eye," Peter said with a laugh. "Too bad Klaus can't. He'd know those emotions he planted have taken root."

"They were there long before their virtual mind games in L.A.," Neal admitted. "It's not the potential profit, it's stepping into the skin of an artist—the ultimate shapeshifting thrill." Before Peter could razz him, he asked, "How do you intend to use the forgery?"

"It's insurance," Peter admitted. "This con is frustrating. We're putting on a show to dupe our enemies, but we don't know how they're reacting. Is Adler in town? Has he sent Fowler? What about Karl Huber? How much has he told Ydrus? Where are the Mansfelds? Klaus knows Joanna Abbot. She and Bianka are friends. What part if any does Joanna play?"

"Wouldn't you know if any of them entered the country?" El asked.

"Probably not," Peter admitted. "They'd likely use forged passports and disguises. We're following Joanna, and she's staying in the region. This weekend she's been in Boston. The agents tailing her have reported that she's spent most of her time in museums and galleries—activities consistent with her profile."

"Has there been any evidence of Kramer contacting her?" Neal asked.

Peter shook his head. "He's not used his Bureau cell phone for transmissions to Ydrus. Win-Win hasn't found anything incriminating. We suspect he's using burner phones. If Joanna returns to New York next week, we may be able to catch the two of them together."

"Neal, did Peter tell you Phil's coming over for dinner tomorrow night?"

"That explains the extra photos of the three of us I've seen scattered about."

"Too much?" She gazed at a new photo of the three of them in front of the Louvre. "I'm particularly fond of that one. I plan to place it in the dining room where he'll see it during dinner."

As they joked about the tactics she and Peter would use on Kramer, Neal was glad to see she didn't appear apprehensive. No one mentioned the extra protection they were all receiving. Henry was now wearing two watches. In addition to the one provided by Win-Win which Adler had doctored, he was also wearing one supplied by the Bureau. El and Sara also had GPS-enabled watches. Mozzie had been offered one but refused to wear it. Although Mozzie had made significant strides in cooperating with the Bureau, there was a limit.

El didn't know that Mozzie had been kidnapped by Fowler last April, but she realized that they were all on heightened alert. They suspected the key players were in town, rounding up crews. The question was how patient they'd be. Peter hoped that curiosity about the Degas painting would make Kramer want to wait for Neal to incriminate himself before making a move. It was less likely that Klaus would approach Neal to warn him. How would he be able to explain he wasn't dead?

Adler was a different matter. He could kidnap either Henry or Neal in an attempt to force the other one to cough up the secrets of the U-boat. Neal had curtailed his use of subways. When he ran in the park, a Bureau agent ran with him. He notified the Bureau in advance of his itinerary and knew Henry and Peter were doing the same. They'd worked too long for this moment. There could be no screw-ups.

WCWCWCWCWCWCW
When Neal arrived at work on Tuesday, he paused at the entrance of the bullpen for just one moment of grousing. Labor Day had been so enjoyable. Why couldn't the night have been the same?

Moment over, he squared his shoulders, slapped a smile on his face, and stepped inside. Everyone except for Neal the slacker was already hard at work. He could see Peter holed up with Kramer in Hughes's office. The glass wall allowed him to scrutinize their expressions. Kramer had a smile on his face. The others also looked at ease.

Neal relaxed too. He'd been given a reprieve. His report to Peter would have to be delayed.

Was he blowing it out of proportion? Peter might think he was cracking under the strain. But he'd made a promise, and the odds were good Peter wouldn't put the con on hold. They were already too far along to backtrack, particularly since Kramer was in town.

Taking down Adler and Ydrus, finding the lost masterpieces—if Neal could help achieve a successful outcome, the rest didn't matter. After last night, he'd been forced to confront reality. He was living on borrowed time. Delays were unacceptable. His challenge was to ensure that Peter viewed it the same way.

Neal went ahead and texted Peter, asking for a meeting. He kept himself busy preparing statistics for Jones on identity fraud. Grunt work invented by Hughes and Jones with the express purpose of giving him something to gripe about. But today he was grateful. The endless blur of spreadsheets took the edge off his overactive imagination.

Kramer was ostensibly in town to discuss the growing involvement of the Mexican drug cartel Sinaloa in art crimes. The problem was real. Fine art had become one of the top means of money laundering. the issue made a convenient cover for Kramer's presence.

Neal had a chance to speak with Kramer briefly when he stopped to chat on his way to the breakroom. Kramer was Mr. Congeniality in his praise of Neal's work with Interpol. He mentioned he'd be in town for several days and wanted to bring Neal into the discussions. Neal had been equally expansive in his reply.

It was late morning before Peter's meeting broke up. When he texted Neal to come upstairs, Kramer and Hughes had already left for the elevators.

"They others have gone downstairs to Organized Crime," Peter explained when Neal entered his office. "They're meeting with Ruiz on the cartel." He smiled, relaxing into his desk chair. "Diana told me earlier this morning that Ruiz has invited her for drinks after work. She'll lay it on thick about how she suspects Hughes and Kramer are pursuing a hot lead. Your days at the Bureau may be numbered."

Neal faked a smirk to cover the unease he felt at Peter's words. They hit too close to home. Not wanting to call attention to the remark, he quickly switched the subject to the Degas. "Has Kramer heard back from the appraiser?"

"He's going to Sterling-Bosch this afternoon to discuss the painting. Kramer was very smooth. He worked it into the discussion effortlessly. Sinaloa has been buying up art at a rapid pace. Kramer speculated that if Jones hadn't seized the Degas, the cartel might have purchased it."

"The topic's a legitimate one for Kramer to focus on. Art is being traded as a commodity on the dark web. It's become a tool of choice for drug lords, organized crime syndicates, and arms traffickers to transact business."
"Which makes it our business, too," Peter said. "Once we've brought this con to a successful conclusion, I expect it to be a primary focus." He paused to wince. "One step at a time. We're a long way from wrapping up this op. But a little long-range planning can't hurt, right?"

Peter looked so confident and happy that Neal's doubts resurfaced. No need to puncture his optimistic balloon so quickly. Tomorrow or the next day would be plenty of time. It wasn't like Peter needed to take any action. The weekend was even—

"Why did you want to see me?"

Faced with a direct question, Neal hesitated. In the past he would have made a joke, buried it deep inside him, and deflected to a different topic. It was a surprise to realize that wasn't what he wanted to do anymore. And judging by his expression, hawk-eyed Peter had noticed something was wrong, too. His smile was gone.

"Something happened last night which may be relevant. I'm probably blowing this out of proportion."

"Let me be the judge," Peter said quietly.

"That Mozart babe I've dreamed about?"

"The blonde who sits beside Mozart while he plays the harpsichord?"

He nodded. "This time the dream was much more vivid than any of the previous ones. They were in a salon of some palace. It looked like Versailles—Louis XVI furniture, ornate paneling, elaborate marquetry on the floor. I observed her take a seat next to Mozart. I'm sure it was Mozart—at least it looked just like the paintings of him. He was wearing a wig and a scarlet doublet . . ." His words trailed off as he was once more transported into the salon. The gilt clock on the mantelpiece ticked softly. Neal was sitting at a card table, eavesdropping.

"Neal?" Peter prompted.

"Right." Neal shook himself mentally. "The woman—I think she was Astrena—was murmuring in his ear. The two joked while he played. I recognized the piece as one of his sonatas." He glanced at Peter for his reaction. He wasn't treating it as a joke. "Anyway, when I woke up, I would have dismissed it as just a vivid dream . . . if I'd been in bed." He swallowed. Peter was going to think he was insane.

Neal studied his hands for a moment. The paint smears were gone, but he could still see what they looked like. "I was standing in front of my easel, working on the painting for Isabelle. I must have been painting for at least three hours. And not only that, it was inspired! What I accomplished was far better than I'd dared hope. I have no idea how I achieved it." He huffed. "If that's what it means to be linked to Astrena, maybe it's not that bad a thing. It could be a blessing, not a curse."

"I wish that was the case. How are you feeling now?"

"Fine"—he shrugged—"Ordinary."

"Trust me, even on your worst day, you're *never* ordinary." The brief smile faded quickly from his face. "But I'd like you to feel normal. Let's treat this as a crime scene. Can you sketch what you saw?"

He nodded although revisiting the dream held zero appeal. "She was wearing an elaborate wig. My drawing will look like something from Marie Antoinette's court."
"That will be a change of pace from our usual fare. The Winchesters believe Astrena is likely a shapeshifter so it may not mean much, but it should still be documented."

Neal wondered if Peter wasn't making the request to help him process what occurred. It might work. If he put it on paper, maybe it would no longer be in his head.

"Have you contacted Dean or Sam?" Peter asked.

"I tried to. Left a voicemail this morning."

"When was the last time Christie gave you a physical?"

Neal hated the direction Peter was going, but it was to be expected. "Last week. She didn't find anything wrong."

"Schedule an appointment with her."

Neal had already told Christie about the curse and she was studying the case of the Connecticut artist who'd died. He was glad that Diana's partner was his doctor. She was the only medical professional he knew of who wouldn't immediately think he'd lost his marbles.

Neal decided to make a preemptive strike on what he knew was bound to come up. "There's no need to delay the con." Before Peter could voice any objections, he added, "Jones, Hughes, Diana, Sara, Henry—they're all working on the timetable we set up."

Peter exhaled, his lips tightening, as Neal watched him anxiously for his verdict. "I don't like it, but you're right. You and Henry are to act the part of kids caught stealing from the cookie jar. Bureau agents will be out in force—even more so now—to capture all those who take the bait." He locked eyes with Neal. "But my decision is dependent on Christie's recommendation, understood?"

"That's fair."

"You'll tell Henry, right?"

"That was the deal. Mozzie already knows."

"I assume you still want to attend classes tomorrow?"

"Of course."

"You'll see Bianka?"

"Yeah, but just at Columbia. She called last night to ask me out on Friday evening. I played the part of the frustrated suitor to the hilt. It's rotten luck that I'm scheduled to work that evening."

"Good. We want them to wonder what you're up to. Kramer's coming over to our house for dinner tonight. I'll call you afterward." As Neal got up to leave, Peter added, "Thank you for telling me."

"Thank you for understanding. I feel better for being able to talk about it." And he meant it. Letting people in had something to be said for it. "I've never conned a Greek Goddess before. I'm gonna need my full crew."

Peter relaxed into a smile. "I haven't read that curse-breaking falls within White Collar's jurisdiction, but I don't know of any other team willing or capable of tackling it."

"It's time for Fox Mulder to move out of the basement and set up his desk in the bullpen. Just wait till
Mozzie hears. This may be what finally makes him a regular visitor to our office."

Peter groaned. "The curse is spreading to us, too?"

Neal appreciated the old, familiar banter. He trusted Peter to not blow the incident out of proportion. And to prove there was a silver lining to everything, he now had a superb painting for Isabelle.

**WCWCWCWCWCWCWCWC**

Kramer raised his wine glass to El. "You're a lucky man, Peter. How did you manage to snare a beautiful woman who also knows how to cook? I haven't had such outstanding cuisine since the last time I was in Paris."

Peter smiled at El. She'd prepared a gourmet feast of rack of lamb. Neal had selected the wines. At $75 a bottle, Kramer should be impressed. During the drive home, Kramer had caught him up on some of the agents Peter had worked with during his time in D.C. He couldn't have been more congenial.

"When we were in Paris in June," El said, "Neal introduced me to a friend of his who owns a bistro. The pâté is her recipe."

"You must convey my compliments." Kramer glanced over at the sideboard. "That photo of the three of you in front of the Louvre is charming."

El gave a nostalgic sigh. Peter admired how natural it sounded. "I envy Neal's ability as an artist. Having him as our museum tour guide was an unforgettable experience. The Louvre is more Peter's domain than mine. His preference is for the Renaissance and Baroque. While they were at work, I spent my time with the Impressionists at the Musée d'Orsay."

"Did you ever consider a career in art?"

"Once upon a time. I majored in art history and you probably remember I worked for a while at an art gallery. It's a hard field, though, to make a career of."

"We should have recruited you for Art Crimes," he said gallantly and turned to Peter. "Elizabeth could be a help on many of your cases."

"If they weren't confidential, I'd welcome her help," Peter agreed, smiling at her.

After dinner she insisted they take their drinks into the living room while she cleared the table. Kramer lingered over the photos in the bookcase, studying in particular the image of Neal and Peter at Yankee Stadium. "You two have become very close," he commented. "He goes to baseball games with you. From what Elizabeth said, you like Renaissance artists. That's his specialty as well, I believe."

"It is." Peter decided to address the issue head on. "You know how I value your opinion. I took your warnings about Neal very seriously. But now I think you appreciate that Neal's the exception. Perhaps most criminals can't shed their former ways, but he has. We have much more in common than I first realized, and that grows stronger the longer we work together."

"It's what makes you such a good team," Kramer commented, taking a seat on the sofa. He didn't attempt to pet Satchmo who was lying on the carpet in front of it.

Satchmo cocked his head and looked reproachfully at Peter as if asking why he'd invited a non-dog lover to their home. *Sorry, Satch. We're undercover tonight.*
Restraining himself to a small whine as if he understood, the Lab trotted into the kitchen, no doubt expecting to be properly rewarded for his part in the con.

"You don't have any doubts about Neal?" Kramer asked.

That was the question Peter hoped to hear. How corrupted had Kramer become? If he weren't a tool of Ydrus, wouldn't he attempt to warn Peter? After everything he'd been told, Kramer must believe that Neal was careening down a disastrous path which would cause Peter's downfall as well. The man Peter had known as his mentor and friend would alert him.

Peter hedged his bets. "He drives me crazy with his non-adherence to standard procedures. Neal takes every FBI manual and tosses it out the window. But the team's results are testimony to his skill. He's made a lot of progress in adapting to the FBI and I'm confident will continue to do so."

Kramer gently rubbed his hands together for a moment. "Neal's actions have forced me to reassess my initial opinion. I don't mind admitting I was wrong. The credit lies not so much with him but with you."

Question answered.

"You should have heard him. Never had I expected to hear Kramer sing your praises so highly."

At Peter's words, Neal sprawled back on the couch and grinned. Peter's phone call was better than he'd imagined. And his expectations had been in the stratosphere. "But I'll be able to, right? Travis's equipment recorded everything?"

"He didn't spend the afternoon at our house in vain," Peter assured him. "Every word came through, both in the dining room and in the living room. I've already checked the recording. Not once did Kramer warn me to be on my guard."

"I saw Sara at the Emporium today. The women have moved their martial arts class to Tuesday evenings. It provided the best opportunity for her to plant the bug in my phone. Although I'm insulted to have to pretend I didn't realize she palmed it."

Peter chuckled. "Your reputation will survive unscathed. I'll even go so far as to not tease you about it."

"I appreciate that. I'd left the phone in my jacket and had it hanging on the chair."

"Did she actually plant it?"

"Yeah, she claimed she wanted the practice. She'll tell Hughes and Kramer about it tomorrow when they meet her at Sterling-Bosch. Hughes is bringing a laptop to demonstrate to Kramer that the signal is coming through loud and clear."

"How many women are in the martial arts class now?"

"Maggie has six students: Angela, Keiko, Sara, Diana, Janet, and now Chloe."

"Chloe's in it, too?" Neal heard a growl in the background. Either Satchmo was working on a chew toy or El had unexpectedly turned into a bear.

"Janet coaxed her into joining them. Chloe already knows Billy and Maggie since they've been
helping her with the botanical guide."

"Does Chloe know the latest on you?" Peter asked. "Here, boy, fetch!"

"What do you want me to fetch, Peter?"

"Not you, Satchmo. And don't deflect."

"I told her," he confirmed. Sara thought he spoke with Chloe to give her a chance to plant the bug. He hadn't explained to her about painting under the influence, and as long as nothing else happened, he didn't plan to. Kramer was giving her enough to deal with.

"Did Chloe have any breakthroughs to report?"

"No, unfortunately. The test mice are still possessed." Neal took a sip of water. "Dean called me back, and the news isn't good. Sam was knifed during a job. Dean suspects it's because his strength isn't at a hundred percent."

Peter restrained himself to a grunt. "Dreams?"

"Nothing that he remembers, but he wakes up feeling wasted."

"How did your appointment with Christie go?"

"She didn't find anything wrong." Neal appreciated that Peter was keeping his voice calm as if he were asking for the status report of a routine investigation.

"What was her recommendation?"

"I should continue to have blood work on a biweekly basis. As long as I don't show any other symptoms, there's no reason to curtail any of my activities. I'll spend tomorrow at Columbia just as I planned."

"You'll let me know if you have any more dreams?"

"You do realize how weird that sounds?"

"What's even weirder is that it doesn't bother me. What those dreams signify does. You didn't answer me."

"You'll be the first one I call."

**WCWCWCWCWCWCWC**

When Henry showed up at White Collar the next day, Peter assumed it was to discuss Neal. With his cousin attending classes at Columbia, Henry could open up without fear of being overheard.

And when he entered Peter's office, that was the first topic he raised. "The con depends upon Neal and me acting as bait for Adler and Ydrus, but there's no need for both of us to be involved. We could develop a scenario where he's been laid low by a case of the flu."

Peter sympathized with how Henry felt. "How would you explain having Neal's phone?"

"We pick each other's pockets all the time—purely as a means to stay in practice, of course," he said, setting his jaw stubbornly as if anticipating Peter's rebuttal. "I could have forgotten to return it."
"Neal's been given a clean bill of health by his doctor. He's acting according to his agreement. If I order him not to participate, he'll protest that I didn't live up to my side of the bargain."

Henry's answer was to cross his arms and glower at him. Not helpful.

"You know how much this means to him," Peter added. "I won't do it—not because of one bad night." He held up a hand to cut short Henry's protest. "But that doesn't mean we can't take additional precautions. Travis and Jones are at the warehouse site now, installing extra surveillance cameras. I've called in agents from Violent Crimes to bolster manpower in the field. The personnel have all been carefully vetted." While Hughes directed the sham operation for Kramer's benefit, using agents from the Office of Professional Responsibility, the real operation was under Peter's command.

When Henry didn't appear to be swayed, Peter added, "Don't lose sight of the bigger picture. Kidnapping is a far greater threat than what happens tomorrow. Neal could easily slam me for not taking enough precautions to protect you. We've already agreed you're the most likely target. To put it bluntly, Adler and Ydrus want Neal to do their bidding, not you."

Henry raised a brow. "Reminding me to keep it professional? Yeah, I deserve that. And I'm checking in with Mother for all my movements."

Mother was the term they'd coined for Travis's team who was in charge of monitoring Neal and Henry's movements. "Neal isn't the only reason I came in. The Baltimore office reported they have a lead on Adler."

Up to now they'd had no luck in tracing Ruiz's calls. Like Kramer, he was suspected of using burner phones. Was this the break they'd been waiting for? Peter reached for the phone. "I want Diana to hear this. She's meeting Ruiz later today."

Diana smiled a greeting at Henry when she entered. "What's up, boss?"

Peter nodded to Henry to continue.

"Yesterday evening Ruiz reverted to his private cell phone to make an overseas call. It was the first time he'd done so in weeks." Henry stopped himself. "I see that unholy glint in your eyes. Did you have anything to do with this?"

Looking every bit as smug as the Cheshire Cat, Diana was practically purring in her chair. She put her bag on her lap and retrieved a phone, a cheap prepaid model. "This may have slipped out of Ruiz's jacket when we had drinks yesterday evening, and I was enjoying our talk so much I forgot to return it. After I told him Neal was suspected of selling Nazi plunder, I knew Ruiz would want to phone in a report."

Henry beamed at her. "Give this woman a raise, Peter. Whatever the FBI is paying her isn't enough."

"Don't you even think about trying to poach her," Peter warned sternly.

Henry sidled near her and, shielded his mouth with a hand. "We'll talk later." Addressing both of them, he added, "I now know who to thank for our breakthrough. Win-Win's tech team in Baltimore was able to trace a call Ruiz made last night to Albania. Specifically a village along the Albanian Riviera called Qeparo. It's in a mountainous area with many isolated estates. It would make an excellent bolt-hole for Adler."

Peter pulled up a map of Albania on his computer and Henry indicated the location.

"Ruiz stayed on the line for about ten minutes then made another call to an unknown number in New York City."
"To an Adler operative?" Peter speculated.

"It's tempting to think so," Henry agreed, "but we don't know the recipient."

"Maybe Adler himself? Or Fowler?" Diana speculated. "I'm meeting Ruiz again this evening. He's assured me that OPR is working with him to unmask Neal's perfidy. And naturally, I'm gullible enough to believe him." She shuddered. "I'm having to take triple showers at night to wash off his slime."

"Albania . . ." Peter considered for a moment. "We could face a similar situation to Argentina. The government is known to have issues with corruption."

"I'll check with Win-Win," Henry offered. "I don't know of any partnerships with private investigation firms in the area, but Graham worked with a detective in Greece who may be able to help."

"Our best shot will be to lure Adler out of hiding." Would Adler's obsession cause him to forsake caution? Up to now the fugitive had been far too wily to return to the States. "If we can catch him in New York, our problem will be solved, but my gut's warning me it won't be that simple. Go ahead and check with Graham. I'll contact John Hobhouse in London and get his take on Albania."

"Do you still want to target Huber first?" Diana asked.

Henry looked to Peter. "Your call."

"Let's stick with the original plan."

"That will also give Adler the maximum amount of time to come to New York," Henry said. "The more he thinks about that U-boat, the more irresistible it will become. His desire to personally supervise the op could be his undoing. I'll see if there's any way we can monitor the airport in—what's the capital of Albania?"

"Tirana," Diana supplied.

He winced. "I can see I need to bone up on my geography for this con."

"You like games at your office," Peter said. "Make a dartboard of a world map."

He grinned. "No pirate ship should be without one."

Notes: I hope you'll join me next week for Chapter 13: Whack-A-Mole, when the first sting takes place. It's been a frustrating time for the team up to now. They've been leaking false intel to both Adler and Ydrus, but they have no way of judging how effective their strategy is. This will be their first chance to find out.

The lost shipment of stolen art is central to this story, and it's given me the opportunity to create links to painters who were featured in the TV series. I wrote about two of them for our blog in a post called "Artistic Easter Eggs: Raphael and Matisse." Penna's contribution to the blog is a thought-provoking post about the use of conflict in stories: "Is it a story without conflict?"

Blog: Penna Nomen & Silbrith Conversation: www.pennasilbrithconversation.blogspot.com
Chapter Visuals and Music: The Harlequin's Shadow board on the Caffrey Conversation Pinterest
website: www.pinterest.com/caffreycon
"Why didn't you put her on speaker?"
Neal had barely ended the call before Mozzie registered his dissatisfaction at being left out of the exchange.
"Chantal's never met you. I didn't want to give her any reason to feel uneasy."

The previous day Neal had received a text message from Chantal that she'd spoken with Klaus's mother Luisa. Much as he would have loved to call her immediately, he was attending the first session of his seminar on Italian Baroque art, and Sherkov had barely warmed up. The news from Paris would have to wait. By the time the class ended, Chantal was in the midst of cooking for the evening crowd. She suggested he call her the next day. Early morning for him translated into post-lunch in Paris and she'd have time to talk.

Once Mozzie heard about the call, he insisted on being present. Afterward they could share a cab for the ride to the Win-Win office to meet Peter and Henry.

Under any circumstances, coaxing Mozzie into the Federal Building was a Herculean chore. With Kramer likely to drop in, it was a non-starter. Henry's office was close to work and provided a convenient safe house for plotting.
"Your responses were disappointingly cryptic," Mozzie chided. "Why did you scribble the German word for violin on your notepad?"
"Because Geigner is the name of the family who lives in the house."
"They could be related to Bergmann! Isabelle said his wife was a violinist. She could have changed her name."
"The thought occurred to me, as well. Bergmann's wife reportedly died during the bombing of Munich. What if instead she assumed a new identity? Klaus's mother Luisa said she'd met the elder Mrs. Geigner. She passed away in the 1990s. Her son, Bernhard, now owns the chalet and uses it as a vacation house. He was very devoted to his mother. Perhaps he kept her belongings."
"Could Luisa describe the location?"
"It's along a mountain road several miles away from Oberammergau. The road is called Feuchtenrainweg. Luisa described the chalet. It's not far beyond a monastery. We shouldn't have any difficulty in locating it."

When Peter arrived at the Win-Win office, Neal, Radha, and Sofia were gathered around the pool table which dominated the central open space behind the reception area. It was a feature Neal never failed to point out. He refused to give up on his campaign to have one installed in the FBI bullpen.
"Neal's been demonstrating a trick," Sofia explained. "It's called the snake shot."
"Required training for the con," Neal said as he lined up the balls into a long winding curve. "When
the first ball is struck with precisely the right amount of force and angle, it sets off a chain reaction, leading to the final ball dropping into a corner pocket."

"Where's Mozzie?" Peter asked, knowing better than to make a fool of himself by attempting to duplicate Neal's expertise.

"With Henry," Radha said. "Sofia and I'll work on the trick while you meet. By the time you come out, I bet we'll have mastered it."

By the way Sofia smiled, Peter suspected she'd already figured it out. Neal had commented she was a natural at billiards, leaving the others, including the chagrined Henry, in the dust.

"The others are in the Zen huddle room," Neal said, placing the final ball into position. "That's become planning central for Operation Barbarossa. It's kept locked when no one's around."

Peter shrugged. "Locks can be tampered with."

"Sure, but this is a Mozzie custom job, complete with a booby trap linked to a surveillance camera designed to catch any unauthorized use."

"Is Mozzie acting as a consultant to Win-Win now?"

Neal smiled. "He's negotiated a contract."

Peter stopped Neal before they entered the room to ask, "No problems last night?"

"None. I'm beginning to think the painting incident was just a random fluke."

"Not with Sam having issues too."

"I'm keeping to my side of the agreement," Neal said with a hint of defensiveness. "You don't have to bring it up."

Neal wasn't normally that touchy, an indication that he was more bothered by the "random fluke" than he wanted to let on. "You're right," Peter said, downplaying the incident. "I'm still getting used to this new openness."

His face relaxed. "So am I."

When they entered the room, Peter saw that Henry had made good on his suggestion. There was now a magnetic world map on one wall which, with the aid of magnetic balls, was being used as a dartboard.

"We've been trading off naming capitals," Mozzie explained. "First one to hit the correct location wins a point."

"What's the score?" Peter asked.

"Ten to three," Mozzie said with a slight shrug. "I've been taking it easy on him."

"Who knew there were so many obscure capitals," Henry grumbled.

"How are you at finding Tirana?" Neal prompted.

Henry spun around and nailed the shot on the first throw.
"Not bad, grasshopper." Mozzie sat down and appropriated one of the Indian hand drums that were on the table to tap a rhythmic beat. "Now that the Suit's here, let the plotting begin."

While Neal described what Chantal had learned, Henry brought up the map of Germany on his laptop and zoomed in on the Bavarian Alps.

"In the chaos after the war, it wouldn't have been difficult for Bergmann's wife to change her name," Neal said. "Since she was a violinist, Geigner is a plausible alias. The chalet may have been purchased during the war. Bergmann could have arranged the alias himself. We haven't found any directions hidden in the painting. Perhaps her husband hid them somewhere in the chalet."

Henry had placed a copy of Bergmann's letter to his wife on the table. He'd found the letter in Adler's office in Argentina. Peter picked it up to refresh his memory. The sheet of paper had survived only in fragments. Much of it was illegible. Experts had been able to pick out the words for a shipment of art. Violin and Candlestick was mentioned by name. At the end of the letter Bergmann said that the key to recovering the art was in the violin. "Bergmann's wife was a violinist. Could we be on the wrong track?" Peter asked, musing aloud. "The Braque painting might not be the key he referred to."

"It's possible Bergmann was simply telling his wife it wasn't a copy but the original art," Neal speculated. "He may have not initially told her, fearing that she couldn't keep the secret, or because he wanted to conceal the crime."

Henry reached for a drum. "Don't forget about that second painting—the Matisse. It also depicts a violin. It's not named in the letter fragments we recovered, but Bergmann could have written about it. Isabelle said that he mentioned both paintings as being ones Nina would love to see. We assume he gave her the Braque. He could have given her the Matisse as well. He may have hidden directions in the Matisse painting instead of the Braque."

Mozzie pursed his lips and tapped a complex rhythm on the drum. "Gentlemen, consider this. Nina Bergmann was an innocent, unaware of the culpability of her husband. Likely distraught from the horrors of war." He paused to hold a hand to his forehead and transformed his face into the picture of grief.

Neal's mouth twitched into a small smile. He passed Mozzie his handkerchief.

The overwrought Mozzie used it to dab his eyes. "Would Nina be able to use reagents to read a hidden code?" He tapped violently on his drum. "Of course not! Her beloved Anton would have made it much simpler. At the time he wrote the letter to her, he was hiding out in the Argentine rainforest. If he hadn't been racked with malaria, he no doubt would have described an easy way to find the directions. Perhaps the instructions were in the letter, but were destroyed by ravenous insects who were merely seeking sustenance to survive."

"Please don't tell me we need to go to Argentina to interview ants!" Peter pleaded.

Mozzie hesitated then shook his head. "Perhaps later, but we do need to search that chalet!"

"Legally," Peter cautioned, giving him the no-crap look which was so effective against Neal. With Mozzie though? He'd likely simply skate around it. "And before that, we'll need background information on the present owner of the chalet. I'll work with Hobhouse on the arrangements." As Neal started to speak, he added, "Don't worry. We'll keep it confidential. In any case, we can't proceed until next week at the earliest. We have back-to-back stings, starting with tonight's op."

Peter seized Mozzie's drum and thumped sharply on it to remind them who the leader of this
Neal sighed. "I wish that weren't a con, and we actually were tailing Adler."

"We may get lucky and nab him tomorrow," Henry said, "but Ydrus is on the menu for tonight. The three of us are staging our arrivals at the warehouse. We'll all be in position by seven o'clock."

Peter noticed he was wearing the watch that Adler had bugged. "You're leaving that watch at home, I trust."

Henry nodded. "I'll only wear the one monitored by Travis's team."

"I'll have mine on as well," Neal assured him. "When is the team led by Hughes scheduled to arrive?"

"Nine o'clock. Kramer expressed a desire to be present at the takedown. Sara's already mentioned that she believes your warehouse to be somewhere in Brooklyn. We expect Ydrus operatives to be on standby status, and we'll be ready for them. Our forces will be in place beginning at six o'clock. Immediately after the Ydrus contingent arrives, Kramer will be taken into custody."

"Any sightings of Huber, Rolf, or Klaus?" Henry asked.

"Not so far," Peter said. "Joanna Abbot left Boston, bound for Montreal yesterday. Her connection may be more tenuous than we'd hoped. Wouldn't she stay around if she knew anything about the U-boat rumors?"

"Even if the Mansfelds are in New York, they may not risk coming to the warehouse." Henry said. "We weren't expecting we'd be able to make a clean sweep at the first pass."

"After tonight we will have removed their eyes and ears," Mozzie predicted. "Kramer's arrest in itself will be cause for celebration."

Neal picked up on his optimistic take. "When we turn over the cards, we may find a luckier hand than we suspected."

"And follow it up with a repeat performance for Adler's benefit the next day," Henry added.

"Since my services aren't required, I'm flying to Europe tomorrow," Mozzie said casually. "I hear the Bavarian Alps are lovely in August."

Peter knew it was coming. He supposed he should be grateful that Mozzie was upfront about it, but that wouldn't keep him from smashing it down. "I know what you're thinking and it's premature. I won't even accuse you of planning to break in. You need to be at the warehouse as well. How believable would it be that Neal and Henry are moving the art without you?" It only took a few seconds for Mozzie to grudgingly concede the truth to his words.

"We also have to scout Adler's site in Albania," Henry said. "If Adler's not captured, it will be our next target. Pops contacted his Greek friend, Yannis Pavrou. He heads a small agency in Athens and is willing to help."

"I asked Hobhouse about the extradition situation in Albania," Peter said. "It's as I feared. We'll have
to be careful how we approach the authorities. If we have hard evidence, we'll have much better odds of success."

"Perhaps a clandestine surveillance to lay the groundwork . . . " Henry suggested, tapping an irregular beat.

Peter exchanged wary glances with Neal and decided to make a preemptive strike. "There's to be no repetition of Argentina."

Henry winced at both of them. "Surely you don't continue to believe that was something I'd planned in advance? Give me a little credit. This will be purely for monitoring purposes. Yannis can spearhead the op. Sofia and Radha could use additional field experience. After we've had a chance to assess the success of Operation Barbarossa, we can decide on our next move."

Meanwhile, their man of the shadows had been lightly grazing his fingers over the drum. "Mozzie, what are you hatching?" Peter asked, trying not to make his tone sound too suspicious. He was beginning to get a headache from the competing drumbeats. Would Mozzie's scheme cause instantaneous migraine?

"Relax, Suit. Simple logistics considerations. The cons will be concluded by Saturday. You and your fellow suits will be interrogating the sharks we've caught in our net. Surely you can't object to my casing out the chalet then."

"We should make contingency plans as well," Neal declared. "I have limited time to operate—and don't give me that look, Henry—I'm talking about my classes. Columbia has zero sympathy for my work at the FBI. Doctoral candidates are supposed to be full time."

"Exactly," Henry said smoothly. "You need to focus on your classes. We can handle the chalet. We'll keep you fully—"

"Forget it!" Neal said, glaring at him. "You need me in Oberammergau. I stole the painting. I'm the only one who knows where it was located in the chalet."

"We'll all go," Peter said, snuffing out their argument. "I'd already decided."

Neal broke into a smile. "When will we leave?"

"Saturday evening." Neal's limited schedule wasn't simply because of classes. Once the stings were concluded, the size of the window they had to operate in before Ydrus lost patience and pulled the trigger was unknown. Peter was willing to schedule a few days to check on the chalet in Oberammergau, but if it didn't pan out, they'd have to leave it to the Europeans to continue the search for the missing art.

"But we won't be alone," Peter added. "There's plenty of money to pay for Diana, Jones, and Travis as well. You want to send Sofia and Radha to Albania? Fine. But Jones and Diana will be with them. They can leave as soon as the sting on Friday is concluded. As for Travis, Marcel has been asking for some technical assistance for his agents. He's about to get it."

Peter didn't need to remind them that until Adler, Klaus, and Rolf were captured, they were all high risk targets. At the conclusion of the stings, Kramer and Ruiz would be seized. Their adversaries would have lost their informants. They wouldn't know if the art existed or not. Desperation would likely lead to extreme measures.

"After Friday's repeat performance, the U-boat con will be over. We'll need to assume different roles," Henry warned, echoing Peter's thoughts.
"We should prepare accordingly," Neal added, nodding in agreement. "Brace yourself, Peter. Disguises may be necessary."

"Not happening," Peter said, squelching that thought before it took root.

Mozzie removed his glasses and used them as a pointer. "Every successful con artist needs to be a chameleon on occasion. My glasses are one of my recognizable features. Switching them to wire-rims can often be enough to throw someone off course. Now imagine if I added a beard. No one would recognize me."

"I still have the Owen Wilson disguise Richard made for me," Neal said. "Henry, do you have anything?"

"When I was on the run last summer, I had one that will fool anyone. I look the spitting image of a young Johnny Depp."

Neal grinned. "This I have to see!"

"I got his mustache and that half-ass goatee mastered. Slap on a wig with the hair flopped across my face, and you'll swear he and I are related." Henry turned to Mozzie. "No need to ask you. You must have so many disguises, your only problem will be figuring out which one to take."

"I'll probably take several," Mozzie admitted happily.

Peter opted for an end run to forestall the looming argument. "Go ahead and play your games if you want, but leave me out of them."

Neal frowned at him. "Aren't you the one who likes to prepare for any eventuality?"

"We're leaving on Saturday. We have back-to-back stings. Even if I agreed, there's no opportunity."

Neal crossed his arms. "We'll make the time."

Perhaps as a way to distract him from any thoughts of disguises, Peter advised Neal to wait till after lunch to report to work. His ploy wouldn't work, but Neal was willing to be the accommodating team player. After killing time playing pool, he hit some of the art galleries in SoHo before finally waltzing in at one o'clock.

Hughes and Kramer had met that morning. By now Kramer would have received the authenticity report from the Sterling-Bosch appraiser. While Neal waited for the elevator, he texted Peter he was on his way. Peter texted back that Kramer and Hughes were in the upstairs conference room and Hughes had been asking for him.

When Neal entered the bullpen, he found Peter standing by his desk.

"Have you met with them?" he asked, flipping his fedora onto the bust of Socrates displayed on his desk.

"Not yet." Peter glanced up at the glass wall of the conference room. "Hughes texted that Kramer may give me a last chance to redeem myself. You ready for a round of whack-a-mole?"

"With our amended playbook? Bring it on."

When they entered the room, Neal saw his painting displayed on the polished wood surface of the
"A Degas!" He rushed forward to view it. "Where'd this come from?"

Kramer chuckled tolerantly. "I thought that would impress our boy wonder. We confiscated it from a fence."

"Caffrey, stop drooling over it," ordered Hughes peremptorily. "What can you tell us about it?"

Neal assumed his patented art critic pose. "The title is *Harlequin and Columbine*. It's a work by Edgar Degas. Pastel and paper on board. Created in the 1880s if I'm not mistaken. By then he'd achieved mastery in the medium—one of the most difficult in the repertoire. His technical innovations have never been surpassed, and many say can never be duplicated." Neal bent over to study the work more closely. "Did the fence divulge how he obtained it?"

Kramer ignored his question. "Do you know anything about the painting's provenance?"

Neal exhaled and paused as if to consider. "I believe it was documented as one of the paintings plundered by the Nazis. I haven't heard anything about it being found."

"You know your history well," Kramer acknowledged. "It's been missing since the Second World War." He turned to Peter. "Have you heard any recent reports of missing war plunder being found? In view of your position on the Interpol art crimes task force, you should be much better informed than us out-of-touch provincials."

Peter took his time before replying. Pursing his lips, he slowly shook his head. Neal felt a glow of pride. Peter the con artist was improving at a spectacular rate. On Labor Day, they'd practiced Peter's delivery. Neal made a mental note to call El. She'd also been sharing acting tips with him.

"I haven't heard any recent reports," Peter said, "but that's not surprising since a fence was selling it. If it's genuine, the discovery was kept a secret."

Kramer nodded as if he concurred. "The painting's already been authenticated."

Neal didn't let a hint of the smile he was feeling cross his face. Too bad that brag wall for his diplomas couldn't hold the authentication certificates of his forgeries.

"What do you make of this?" Kramer asked, keeping his voice neutral. He tossed a tabloid onto the table. The lead story was one of Mozzie's planted news accounts—a lurid tale of a fisherman who'd spotted a ghost submarine off the North Carolina coastline. The accompanying photo was a murky view of a U-boat on the surface of the ocean.

Peter snorted his derision of the notion. "I hope this isn't what you're using for your news source. What connection could a U-boat have with Degas?"

Hughes's face had hardened into granite with zero reaction coming out of him. Kramer treated the account as a joke while slanting a glance at Neal every few seconds. Neal added a hint of watchfulness to his expression—a slight narrowing of the eyes, a tightening of his lips to make the smile seem superficial.

Neal was giving Kramer what he wanted—confirmation of Sara's account. Tonight, once Neal's bugged cell phone indicated the location, Kramer would alert Ydrus. They'd move into the warehouse, overpower Henry, Neal, and whoever else was there. Ydrus would confiscate the art while likely offering to give Neal and Henry a share in the proceeds and keep them safe from exposure. By the time the Bureau agents led by Hughes and Kramer swarmed in, the warehouse would be bare. Or so Ydrus hoped.
So far, Kramer was acting exactly as they'd predicted, and Peter played the innocent dupe to the hilt. Kramer expected that Neal would panic at the thought of the Bureau having confiscated the Degas. He probably thought that Neal would welcome the Ydrus crew as saviors.

Later tonight it would be Kramer's turn to panic.

WCWCWCWCWCWCWCWC

By six o'clock, Peter had his team assembled inside the warehouse. Members of the Violent Crimes unit, called in to perform backup support, were stationed outside where they could monitor the streets. Travis and Badillo were coordinating communications from a van parked a block away.

Peter had five agents hidden behind carefully constructed crates in the warehouse with additional forces concealed near the front entrance. Once Ydrus arrived, the suspects would need to be apprehended in the act of threatening the pirates. As soon as the FBI agents emerged from hiding, it would be obvious that Neal, Henry, and Mozzie were part of the scheme. Everyone was wearing bulletproof vests, but even so, the Ydrus operatives would need to be taken down immediately to avoid bloodshed.

A bulletproof crate had been constructed for the three pirates to dive into once the Bureau agents appeared. As an additional precaution, they also had remote switches to kill the lights. The team had built in every safety measure they could think of, but Peter still stewed.

Everyone was confident that Kramer was informing Ydrus via burner phones, but there was no confirmation. At least with Adler, they had the evidence provided by Ruiz's intercepted phone call.

The only known agents for Ydrus, aside from Kramer, were the Mansfeld brothers, Huber, and the husband and wife tech specialists Marta and Jacek Kolar. Joanna Abbott's role was unidentified. She could be Python, the leader of Ydrus, or simply a friend of Klaus's. All they had to go on were a tattoo of a snake and an acquaintanceship with Bianka Kaldy.

The FAA hadn't purchased Win-Win's facial recognition software, but its value in any case was limited. Disguises could trick the program. Nor was there any effective means to monitor all the bus terminals, railroad stations, and hundreds of thousands of private cars on the metropolitan streets. Peter's team was flying on a wing and a prayer.

And if no one showed? At the bare minimum, they'd still arrest Kramer. Hughes would supervise that personally once he got the signal from Peter. The op Kramer expected to take part in would never happen. He'd be arrested before he had a chance to leave the Federal Building.

Henry arrived on the scene in a rental car at six forty-five. Fifteen minutes later Mozzie and Neal appeared in a dilapidated Ford Pinto.

The three pirates kept themselves loose by playing charades. Mozzie had suggested the subject be movie titles. Their antics served to entertain the rest of the team. From their hiding positions, Diana and Jones were calling out completely random guesses. Peter's entertainment was to check his watch every two minutes.

It was now seven fifteen. If by eight thirty no one showed, he'd have to phone in the bad news to Hughes.

"We could string the con out a little while longer," Jones's voice murmured in his earpiece. "With Kramer no longer supplying intel, we might be able to smoke out other Ydrus operatives."

"Whether or not anyone comes to the warehouse, the sting continues as we'd planned." Peter aimed
to project confidence in a scheme that was looking wackier by the moment. Once Kramer was arrested, he'd be unable to send any messages to Ydrus. What would they assume? That he'd been caught? That he'd double-crossed them? Rolf might suspect Peter had tipped Neal off at the last moment.

Henry had just performed a hilarious mime of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo Nest* when the wait ended.

"Targets arriving!" Travis trumpeted in Peter's earpiece. He reported three panel vans turned off Flushing Avenue onto the small side street the warehouse was located on.

The pirates moved into position. The concealed agents confirmed their readiness. It was show time.

**WCWCWCWCWCWC**

Would Klaus walk through the entrance? Neal doubted it, but this was the time to dream. Henry and Mozzie were helping him nail a lid onto a crate. When the confrontation started, they'd dart inside a large crate which was standing next to them. It was designed to look like it held a Renaissance altarpiece.

Peter had been sneaky. By ordering them to hide in the same crate, he was ensuring no one would call an audible. They were all watching over each other.

Henry set to work hammering a nail into a board. They were talking in low voices about the paintings which still needed to be crated when Ydrus barged in.

Six men. No hoods or apparent disguises. They must have been confident they didn't need them. Amateurs.

They were all carrying firearms, including their ringleader—Karl Huber.

Neal had only seen photos of Huber, but there was no chance of mistaking who he was. He looked like a ship's commander in a thick navy pullover sweater with his silver hair brushed back. At the sight of the Nazi insignias on the crates, his ruddy complexion turned even redder.

"Lay down those tools," he ordered with a jerk of his head. "My men will take it from here. You've got a new boss."

When Neal started to protest, Huber cut him off abruptly. "We're doing you a favor. The FBI's on its way. By the time they arrive, all they'll find is an empty warehouse."

When Peter shouted for them to lay down their weapons, Neal, along with Henry and Mozzie, dashed inside the crate as directed. From then on, Neal was forced to imagine what was happening. The agents had been prepared with gas masks and tear gas, but they weren't necessary. With agents swarming in from the sides and the rear, Huber and his men had no choice but surrender. There was no bloodbath.

After all the buildup, it seemed a bit underwhelming. Still, as a beginning, it wasn't bad. Not a single bullet fired. They'd arrested one of their primary targets. Kramer would be in custody within an hour, and they'd get to stage an encore performance the following night.

**WCWCWCWCWCWC**

When Neal arrived at work the next day, there was no hint of a celebration in the bullpen. No one wanted Ruiz to catch wind of the sting. Hughes called off the raid as soon as Kramer was arrested. His team in D.C. had no idea their leader was now in custody.
Both Hughes and Peter participated in the interrogation along with Tricia. The team briefing was delayed until midday so that the preliminary results could be included. Hughes delivered the details in person. "Kramer is cooperating," he reported to a hushed group. "At this point, he realizes a plea bargain is his only sane choice. He insists his only crime was to pass along information, but we're wielding a much more serious stick—accessory to murder. We maintain Kramer was the one who leaked information to Ydrus about our capture of Longthorpe."

Duncan Longthorpe, the former head of Ydrus's U.S. operations, had been gunned down by an unknown assassin after being arrested in May. As Neal heard the revelations unfold, incidents from the past several months sharpened into focus.

"According to Kramer, Caffrey's arrival at the Bureau was the trigger which caused his descent," Hughes said. "Bunch of hogwash, if you ask me. Caffrey is the excuse but his resentment must have been building for a long time. It's clear that career dissatisfaction also played a key role. Kramer has complained for years that his unit wasn't budgeted adequately. Then in June of 2004, he was approached by Bryan McKenzie."

Hughes paused, a slight smile flitting across his face, at the startled reaction of the team members, Neal among them. But Bryan was ideally situated to be the middleman. Sterling-Bosch was the lead provider of insurance for fine art in the country. Kramer must have worked closely with them over the years, making frequent use of their appraisers for art evaluations. Before Bryan was transferred to London in the fall of 2005, he was Sterling-Bosch's top investigator for art crimes. It would have appeared perfectly natural to consult with Kramer.

The timing was particularly cruel. This was about the same time that Bryan and Sara had started dating.

"McKenzie approached Kramer in June of 2004 with concerns over Caffrey's involvement with art cases because of his record with Interpol," Hughes continued. "He began insinuating that it was Kramer's duty to get him to quit, and Kramer agreed. McKenzie included him in occasional email correspondence to Python. Kramer was led to believe that Python was an Interpol agent working undercover with the Leopard. He was told that if he'd hide evidence of the Leopard stealing the Raphael painting in D.C. last summer, he'd be given the means to incriminate Caffrey for the crime."

"Why did he agree?" Jones asked.

Hughes scowled. "Because the man's a fool."

"Remember, Kramer believed Python was an Interpol agent," Peter added. "He was told that for the sake of the mission, it was vital the Leopard not be identified. Kramer was led to believe that Python would be able to recover the painting once the op was concluded."

Travis's mouth dropped open. "And he was gullible enough to believe it?"

"McKenzie sold Sara a pack of lies," Neal pointed out. "I can see him doing the same with Kramer."

"He was damned clever about it," Hughes agreed. "After Kramer concealed the incriminating evidence, a substantial sum of money—fifty thousand dollars—was placed in a Swiss bank account in his name. Shortly afterward, McKenzie pulled the rug out from under Kramer's feet and said that Interpol had changed its mind. Caffrey wasn't to be framed, after all. That's when Kramer drafted that email, protesting the decision to Python—the email which Travis later found on his personal computer."

"Kramer hasn't just funneled information about Neal and me to Ydrus," Peter said. "All of you were
included—Hughes, Jones, Diana, and Travis. The Mansfelds used those files to paint realistic portraits for that virtual reality nightmare they planted in Neal's mind last month."

"That means we should be prepared for them employing the same technique again," Jones pointed out. "We assume that the neuropsychologist who worked with them has fled to their stronghold."

Jones didn't need to remind Neal about Rolf's mad scientist. The fact that Rolf believed their virtual reality brainwashing worked would likely encourage him to try it again. Probably not Neal since there was no reason to. But Peter? Elizabeth? Any of the team members could be targeted, as well as those close to Neal.

Kramer's confession made the need to discover Ydrus headquarters even more urgent, and they were still without leads. Despite intensive interrogation, Huber wasn't coughing up anything. Kramer maintained that he only discovered last spring that he had in fact been aiding Ydrus, not Interpol. He claimed to have no knowledge of either Python's identity or her location. Was that the truth or was he simply worried he'd suffer the same fate as Duncan Longthorpe? That was likely why Huber was refusing to talk.

Huber refused to disclose what he'd intended to do with the crates or what his plans were for Neal and his fellow pirates. The thugs working for him claimed not to know either. The location of Huber's wife and children was still unknown. Perhaps they were being held as collateral to ensure he remained mute.

After the briefing, Hughes left for another meeting. Peter ordered box lunches for the team from the coffee shop on the ground floor. They still had the details of the Adler sting, which was scheduled for tonight, to finalize but Kramer's actions continued to weigh heavily on everyone's mind. Peter was wise to give everyone the opportunity to vent.

Neal and Peter had known for a while that their files were in the hands of Ydrus, and on an intellectual level the other members must have known they were also targets, but it was a blow to have it confirmed.

Travis was particularly affected. One of Penfold's virtual reality programs had apparently been designed to use on his partner Richard in an especially callous attempt to test the procedure.

"Diana could have a high target value because of the stories she's writing," Jones warned and turned to face her. "Have you alerted Christie?"

She nodded, ripping open a bag of multigrain chips. "We're going about our lives like the rest of you are. Letting each other know where we'll be, keeping on the lookout for anything suspicious. But what we really need to do is catch those bastards."

"It won't be long before we'll hear from them," Neal predicted, confident of his assertion. "Thanks to Kramer, Ydrus knows about the U-boat and how I fenced a missing Degas masterpiece. Now they probably believe Henry and I pulled a fast one."

"And this is where I go from being dupe to puppetmaster," Peter added. "It's about time. With their communications link severed, Ydrus is flying blind. We want them to think Neal or I caught wind of the sting and moved the art before it could be seized. We staged the warehouse scene to trap Kramer and Huber and now know where a fortune in lost masterpieces is stashed."

Jones chuckled. "Rolf will want Peter more than ever for pulling off that con."

Travis frowned as he swallowed a bite of sandwich. "But won't that give them even more reason to
initiate their blackmail scheme? They probably don't believe Hughes was part of the con, and that Neal's position at the Bureau is more tenuous than ever."

"My money's on them not using the Vermeer yet," Diana countered. "They probably want Neal to stay in place at the Bureau. They may have designs on Peter being their next mole. Slapping on my evil Azathoth thinking cap, I'd make use of Bianka."

"Put their white queen into play? Take advantage of my supposed weakness? Let them try," Neal said, eager to lay that myth to rest once and for all.

"Any updates on Bianka?" Peter asked.

"Spoke with her this morning. I won't need to fabricate any excuses for a few days. She was mugged yesterday evening. A couple of thugs attacked her on her way home. Stole her purse. One of them had a switchblade. She suffered a concussion and a bad gash to her arm. She called me from the hospital this morning."

"You think there's any connection to our op?" Travis asked.

"I can't see what it would be," Neal said.

"Let's not look a gift horse in the mouth, especially when Europe's calling," Peter advised.

"We have our tickets to Albania on Saturday morning," Jones said. "Diana and I aren't flying in the same plane as Radha and Sofia. They'll arrive in Athens today to meet with Graham's friend Yannis. On Sunday, they'll connect with us in Tirana."

"I've never been to the Albanian Riviera," Diana said. "I'm looking forward to it. I bought a new bikini for the occasion. Sofia and I have already claimed rights to surveillance duty on the beach below the estate. She told me Yannis had sent an agent to perform advance scouting."

"Much as I'd like to think we can snag Adler and Fowler tonight," Jones said, "the odds are against it. In any case we'll need evidence from his hideout. We'll be on standby till we get your instructions."

At the end of lunch, Travis raised an eyebrow at Neal, and he nodded in response. Peter was relishing his new role. Did he realize that every puppetmaster needed to know how to shapeshift? They'd soon find out.

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Notes: Peter's breathing easier now that the first arrests have been made. In next week's chapter, the sting is repeated even as plans continue for the next phase. When a chapter's called Kidnapped, that could be a warning.

I added a nod to the canon episode "Countdown" when Kramer requests Neal inspect a forgery he'd made of a Degas. In my version, Peter and Hughes are on Neal's side. Degas is one of the artists featured in this week's blog post: Artistic Easter Eggs: Degas and Vermeer.

Thanks for reading and commenting!

Blog: Penna Nomen & Silbrith Conversation: [www.pennasilbrithconversation.blogspot.com](http://www.pennasilbrithconversation.blogspot.com)
Chapter Visuals and Music: The Harlequin's Shadow board on the Caffrey Conversation Pinterest website: [www.pinterest.com/caffreycon](http://www.pinterest.com/caffreycon)
Kidnapped


Peter assumed he was safe. He'd scheduled a review with Hughes on the upcoming budget for the afternoon. Given the stack of details he was prepared to discuss, the meeting could easily last the rest of the day. There was simply no time for any other activities. All that talk about disguises was probably just Neal razzing him. He wouldn't dare plan anything sneaky.

Peter paused at the entrance to Hughes's office. This was Neal. Of course, he was working on something sneaky.

And on a purely intellectual level, Peter could go along with there being a slight chance disguises would be needed. If they didn't catch Adler tonight, they'd attempt to draw him out of hiding in Europe. The fugitive had spent decades searching for a U-boat. After being fed the clues by Ruiz, his obsession must be all-consuming. Kidnapping would remain a real threat until he was behind bars. Adler could easily track their movements via Henry's watch. Neal and Henry argued that it was better to provoke him into action now than spend years wondering when he would strike again.

But Neal hadn't mentioned a word about disguises since their meeting at Henry's office. He knew Peter was a busy man with matters far more important than costumes to consider—like an afternoon of number crunching with Hughes.

But Peter had barely started on his second page of notes when his superior pulled the rug out from under him.

Glancing at his watch, Hughes shook his head regretfully. "Sorry to cut this short, but the assistant director called a meeting on me. I gather it's just as well. Caffrey alerted me that you also have an appointment. I'm surprised you didn't mention it. We could have rescheduled."

"I didn't know I had one," Peter admitted, wincing.

"An end-run maneuver? Given the nature of the appointment, it was a smart move."

As Peter stood up to meet his doom, Hughes said, "Oh, one last thing. I'm sure I don't need to remind you, what with your commendable attention to thorough documentation, but I fully expect to see photos included in the file." Hughes snorted a chuckle. "I wish I'd brought my camera to capture your expression right now."

Neal was perched on the edge of his desk, waiting for him in the bullpen, an innocent smile on his face. "Ready to be transformed?"

"You could have let me know."

"Would you have agreed?"

"Definitely not."

"I rest my case."

To save commuting time, Richard, who worked in the vicinity, had offered to meet them in the apartment he shared with Travis in the Village. Richard's boss, Ian Forster, was happy to accommodate the Bureau's request. Scima Gameworks apparently still felt guilty over the role they'd
unwittingly played in Neal's virtual reality ordeal in Los Angeles. Neal could have sued them, and Peter suspected Mozzie had urged him to do so, but he hadn't. Neal's take was that the favors he'd accumulated by not pressing a lawsuit were more valuable.

During the short drive, Neal was in high spirits, dreaming up improbable disguises for Peter to wear. "Confess, haven't you always wanted to dress like a clown?"

Peter played along, suspecting Neal had seized on the topic as a technique to keep himself loose for the upcoming sting. The previous evening it was charades. Now it was costumes. Well, two could play that game. "Is this punishment for Diana's last story?" Peter challenged while keeping his eyes on traffic so Neal couldn't launch into any complaints about his driving.

"Whatever could you mean?"

"You know perfectly well the scene I'm referring to. Does your rendition of 'Blackbird' while our characters were trying to escape Sornoth's fortress ring a bell?"

"Hmm. Oh yes, I remember now. Diana did rather overplay the loopiness factor."

"I thought she showed admirable restraint."

"So you admit it! You told her about St. Louis."

"I confess to nothing, but I certainly have ample material. In addition to that performance, you've provided numerous other examples."

"What others?" Neal asked, his expression grown wary.

"Let's see... there was the time you were convinced I was a dinosaur and sang 'Up, Up and Away,' and who can forget you singing 'I Feel Fine' to El and me on the phone?"

Neal groaned. "Tell me you didn't mention these to Diana. Doesn't she already have enough material to blackmail me with?"

"It sounds to me like we're due for another pinky swear. In return for no more teasing on costumes, I'll restrain myself from sharing more examples."

Peter held out his right hand and Neal hooked fingers.

"You strike a hard bargain," Neal conceded. "Someone more devious than me might suspect a trap. Did you deliberately exaggerate your aversion to win the concession?"

If Neal wanted to see a hidden conspiracy, Peter didn't mind taking the credit. "Just reminding you who the puppetmaster is."

Neal smiled. "Touché... and I appreciate your willingness to go along." When he cleared his throat, Peter flicked him a quick glance. Gone was the teasing kid. He'd been replaced by a thoughtful adult. "When we go to Europe, we'll no longer be in control of the action. We'll need to be prepared to handle a multitude of options. It's reassuring to know that you'll be equipped to lead the cavalry without revealing your identity."

If Neal had phrased it that way at the beginning, Peter would have agreed without hesitation. Why was it that Neal insisted on making everything so complicated?

They were in luck and found a parking place on the same block as Travis's building.
"You'll feel this trip is worth it just to see the apartment," Neal said when he rang the buzzer at the front entrance. "You haven't been inside yet, have you?"

"The closest I've come is to drop Travis off," Peter admitted.

When they were buzzed up, they took the elevator to the fifth floor. Neal's hints left Peter curious about what the place was like. Travis owned his apartment in the co-op building. Richard had moved in about six months ago.

When the door opened, they were greeted by an apparent stranger. Peter stared at the transformation. "Travis? If this weren't your place, I wouldn't have recognized you."

"You're the first to see my disguise. Do you like it? I could hardly use my Vulcan ears for undercover work."

Travis now had a shock of hair heavily tinted with blond highlights. The hair on top was quite long and fell in front of his face. His nose had been altered and he had a short beard. It gave him a vaguely Viking appearance. It was a look he could work as a carpenter, longshoreman, or a man about town in a tuxedo.

Richard was standing behind Travis, grinning at the reaction.

"I'm feeling better," Peter admitted. "You can turn me into another Viking, and I'll be happy."

"Oh, but we can't have two look-alikes," a familiar voice protested, and El walked into the entry with Sara.

"Just how large a conspiracy is this?" Peter asked, faking a grumble.

"Sara's my hair stylist," Richard said, "and to have a satisfied customer, I know I'll need to have Elizabeth's approval."

"I was delighted when Richard called me," El said. "We've been discussing options for the past half hour."

"I'm surrounded by connivers," Peter muttered, but secretly he welcomed their involvement. For once, El wasn't being left out of the loop.

"Did you style Travis's hair?" Neal asked Sara.

"You like it?"

"He's rocking it."

She smiled. "I'm glad to hear you say so. As I recall, you were less enthusiastic when I gave your hair highlights last year."

"That's different. Travis knew it was coming."

Sara had raised a sensitive subject. Peter remembered all too well Neal's moans and groans about her trick. Before he could let loose again, Peter cut in. "I hope I'm going to get the tour? I need to see the world you two created."

"Not just one world," Travis said with all the pride of the space nut he was. "Multiple. Each room is a different planet."
Pale washes of color evoked alien landscapes on all the walls of the apartment. The theme was also carried out on the ceilings which had been transformed into extraterrestrial skies. A few hints of the creatures Richard was so skilled in bringing to life could be seen peeking out from misty vistas and desertscapes. Furthest along was the kitchen which conjured up the windy sand dunes of the planet Vulcan.

The men were minimalist in their furniture with more worktables than chairs. Electronic gear coexisted with art and sculpture supplies. Richard had carved out a music niche for his guitar in the living room.

Richard led Peter into the kitchen for the transformation and had him sit on a bar stool. After seeing all the science fiction, Peter was in a better mood. He was simply disguising himself to be an alien. Nothing wrong with him indulging in a little fantasy, too.

"Do you have any preference?" Richard asked.

"I wouldn't mind a Viking look like Travis's," Peter admitted.

"How about with dark hair?" El suggested. "But with a beard like Travis?"

Sara was studying Peter intently, making him a little nervous. "Perhaps just a few highlights to soften the effect."

El's eyes brightened. "Definitely!"

"I feel your pain," Neal murmured.

"You complained for weeks when the highlights didn't wash out," Peter muttered back.

"But Sara will use a wig, so you won't have to worry."

"Won't the beard be hard to put on?" Peter asked, as Richard draped a cloth around him.

"I'm working on a new technique which simplifies application."

"It only takes me five minutes to transform myself," Travis said. "I don't need Richard's help to apply the makeup."

"But it will take time to prepare the beard," Richard warned, "plus I'll need to teach you the technique. Since you're leaving tomorrow, let's go with something simpler for now."

"I recommended something similar to Tom Selleck," El said. "He has your rugged good looks, and you've commented how you admire his mustache."

That was a little strong, but Peter restrained his growls. It could be worse. Selleck drove a Ferrari in Magnum, P.I. As long as El didn't insist on Hawaiian shirts, he wouldn't complain.

They settled on a nose piece which would be easy to apply, a wig, and mustache. While Richard made a mold of his nose, El asked Travis about their trip to New Orleans.

"Richard and I spent the weekend mucking out. That was a new term to me."

"And me too," Sara said. "What does it mean?"

"Basically ripping out everything from a house that got wet—not just the furniture and appliances but flooring, carpets, drywall, and insulation. That's to prevent mold from forming. Luckily Richard's
parents weren't flooded but many of their friends were. They live in the Garden District, one of the oldest neighborhoods in New Orleans. Lots of small shotgun houses with rooms arranged one behind the other. The devastation is enormous. It will take years to rebuild."

"We were glad to do what we could," Richard said, "and it shows something good can come out of the worst tragedy. Dad came to see us while we were mucking out the house of one of his friends." He gave a rueful smile. "It's a start."

Travis looked at him with sympathy. "It's the first time his dad's spoken to him since Richard came out. Martin was gracious in his appreciation for what we were doing."

"People change," Peter commented. "Don't give up on Martin. Look at me. I never thought I'd wear another disguise. That has to prove there's hope for any transformation."

WCWCWCWCWCWCWCWCWC

The sting on Friday night was for the benefit of Adler and his gang. In many respects it was a carbon copy of the previous night when they arrested several Ydrus operatives. This time Diana leaked word to Ruiz about the upcoming op. She also divulged that she'd heard the warehouse was located in Brooklyn. They were confident that Adler would take advantage of Henry's bugged watch to pinpoint the location.

It was another waiting game to see who would fall into their net, and although Adler failed to appear, snaring Garrett Fowler was enough of a prize to have Neal smiling all night. It had been a year since Fowler used his position at the Office of Public Responsibility to frame him for a crime. Watching Fowler being led off in handcuffs went a long way to erase the lingering bitterness.

Fowler had brought along several thugs with him who would also enjoy the hospitality of the New York Department of Correction. Ruiz had been arrested at home as soon as Fowler was snagged.

Neal returned to the office the following morning mainly to hear about the results of the interrogation. They'd leave for Paris that evening. The next time Neal would be back at work was up in the air.

He was ticking off his emails when Henry entered the bullpen. Plopping into a chair, he asked, "What's the latest?"

It was a good feeling to no longer have to confer in secret. Kramer was on ice. The bullpen was once more friendly territory. Still not optimal. No pool table like Henry had. Neal took it as a reminder that his work wasn't done.

"When I arrived, Tricia and Peter were already questioning Fowler and Ruiz."

"Any reports yet on what if anything they coughed up?"

"Not so far. Tricia let Fowler stew in the Municipal Correctional Center overnight before starting in on him. You got your bags packed?"

"I'm ready."

"What did you tell Eric?"

"That I'm going away on business, and don't give me that look. I'm being completely honest."

"A business trip where we may be kidnapped? What if Adler decides to use Eric as an additional
insurance policy?"

"The chances are minimal of that happening. There's a slight chance Adler would go after Mom. She's aware of the risk and is taking extra precautions. I've told Eric to be careful as well. He's got a GPS watch like Angela's wearing. You're lucky that you're not in a relationship with anyone."

Neal nodded. Sara wasn't aware of the strategy. She only knew they were leaving for Europe. He'd debated telling her but there didn't seem to be any point. Why make her worry?

"Adler and Kate are probably still in Albania," Henry said. "Man, I'd love to be a fly on the wall to hear his reaction! Does he believe the U-boat is real?"

"I bet he does. We were too smart to get trapped, and hid the art before the raid. I see you're still wearing the watch Adler bugged."

Henry smiled. "Adler has to be drawn out of hiding if we're to have any hope of capturing him."

"Nothing stupid, right?"

"You know who you sound like. Did Peter tell you that too?"

"Didn't need to. He knows who the smart one is." Neal nodded toward the entrance of the bullpen. Peter was walking through the doors.

Their crew leader rolled a chair over to sit beside them. "Should I be worried about what you two are scheming about?"

"Worried?" Henry broke into a confident smile. "Of course not."

Peter narrowed his eyes but didn't comment further. They'd sworn to keep everyone fully informed of their plans. Peter was demonstrating his trust. "We've finished the interrogations for now. We made the most progress with the men Fowler hired to help. One of them admitted under questioning that he helped Fowler kidnap Mozzie last April. We're using the abduction as leverage. Tricia and I took pleasure in informing Fowler that Mozzie can identify him as the ringleader. Now we have corroboration."

Neal smiled. "Sweet revenge. Fowler doesn't know Mozzie would never agree to be on the witness stand."

"Tricia will continue the work this afternoon," Peter said. "All the original charges against Fowler—conspiracy to commit fraud and falsifying evidence—still stand. In the first case, Fowler aided a man charged with murder. Tramonte has already made a plea bargain, and confessed to an earlier homicide burglary. Ruiz can be charged as an accessory as well. So far no one has incriminated Adler, but if we can get our hands on him, Tricia believes the others will eventually fold."

"How has Ruiz try to defend his actions?" Neal asked.

"It's as we suspected. Fowler mentored Ruiz when he started at the Bureau. The two maintained a close friendship. Ruiz insists that you were the cause of Fowler's downfall. He seems unaware of the extent of the charges against Fowler when he fled. Since Ruiz only kept him informed of your movements, he didn't believe he was doing anything incriminating. He claims he knew nothing about Mozzie's kidnapping, or the extent of Fowler's involvement with the Italian thief."

It wasn't a great feeling. Adler roped Fowler into framing Neal for the theft of the earrings. If Neal hadn't joined the FBI, Fowler might never have been approached. Ruiz would still have his job. And
"Kramer? He would likely never have agreed to work with first Bryan then Ydrus."

"Don't let this mess with your head," Henry urged quietly. "You're not responsible for their actions."

"Henry's right," Peter agreed. "With their attitudes, they would have taken advantage of the system in some other way if you hadn't been here."

Neal had grown used to Henry knowing what he was thinking. That Peter could too was a little disconcerting but also reassuring. "Thanks. I'm chalking this one up to one long con. I've been operating undercover to expose the corruption in the Bureau."

"Exactly," Henry said, approval in his eyes. "Or call it a variant of three-dimensional chess where we're playing with two opponents—Ydrus and Adler. For Adler, we've knocked out his bishop and knight—Fowler and Ruiz. We still have the king and queen to capture."

"I heard from Diana at the airport," Neal said. "She and Jones are on their way to Albania now. Travis and Mozzie have already left. By the time we fly over the Atlantic, Mozzie may be in Oberammergau." He cocked an eyebrow at them and grinned. "You ready to find some Nazi plunder?"

As Peter surveyed the two pirates clustered around Neal's desk in the bullpen, he was torn. The grown-up voice inside him advocated being the voice of reason. He had over ten years of service to the Bureau and was responsible for apprehending criminals while minimizing the risk to field agents.

Instead, he'd signed off for the three of them to paint large bullseyes on their chests while they ran off to Europe on a quest for plundered treasure. And he could feel the pirate blood rising in his own veins. The U-boat con, aka Operation Barbarossa, was concluded. It was time for Operation Treasure Hunt.

His mom, if she only knew, wouldn't be in the least surprised. She'd remind him Robert Lewis Stevenson's *Treasure Island* had been one of his favorite books as a child. Once their lives returned to normal—which in the odd moment Peter liked to think would eventually happen—keeping that spirit of adventure would be his challenge. To be at their top performance potential, all the team members needed to engage their inner pirate from time to time.

But another Stevenson story weighed even more heavily on his mind at the moment. It had also been a childhood favorite. Would fusing *Kidnapped* with *Treasure Island* lead to a happy ending?

"It's really the only sane course of action," Henry said calmly. "As long as Adler seeks refuge in countries with vague extradition laws who have officials susceptible to bribes, he'll never be captured. And that's not to stigmatize Argentina and Albania. There are regions in the U.S. where he could also escape notice for a long time."

Neal nodded agreement. "You and I lived off grid for years in the States and could have continued that way if we hadn't contacted your father. The aliases we had for Urban Legend were robust enough to last for decades. And we could have slipped into others just as easily."

Peter slung his feet on top of the desk, enjoying Neal's raised eyebrow at his action. He probably considered that his signature move, but move over, Caffrey. There was another pirate at the table. "Just so we're clear, what we're signing off on is to allow one or more of us to be kidnapped."

"Sounds good to me," Neal said cheerfully. "The key players—Klaus, Rolf, Python, and Adler—are still at large. A kidnapping conviction should put the perp away for a long time to come. The odds
are in our favor that Adler will strike first. That gives us an additional advantage. The longer we can keep the dream of stashed art alive, the easier it will be to trap Ydrus."

"Most likely, the Mansfelds believe that there actually was a U-boat," Henry added. "All the groundwork we prepared about it still holds water. The Degas Neal forged was certified authentic by Sterling-Bosch. Kramer must have passed that on."

"Klaus is aware of Neal's skill though," Peter reminded him. "He could believe it's a forgery."

"True," Henry admitted. "But that won't change their thinking. The evidence from Huber's safe is too compelling. Klaus could easily believe Neal is holding onto the original while making multiple perfect copies of it."

"Now Rolf and Klaus want to deal themselves in," Neal added, moving his keyboard aside so he could swing his feet onto the desk in front of his monitor. "They're tracking our movements while biding their time."

"Their objective is to have you remain in New York and work for the Bureau while pursuing your degree," Henry theorized, snatching the far end of Neal's desk for his own feet. "It's the perfect front for the thefts and forgeries you'll be performing for them on the side. They have the Vermeer trigger they can play at any time, but they'd much rather see what happens to the U-boat story first. They may even jump in to protect you if they sense you're in danger."

"And that leaves the field open to Adler," Peter said. "He's kidnapped before. He'll do it again."

Henry nodded complacently. "I'm the most likely target. If Adler approaches me, I'll express my willingness to make a deal." He studied the ceiling for a moment. "I'm totally without scruples, always on the lookout for a new opportunity . . . Yep, that'll work. I can build on the reports Ruiz sent in about my dipping into the company till to pay for my extravagant lifestyle. After seeing how my father was corrupted by Win-Win, I have become cynical and don't mind in the least screwing my own company."

"You could even build on your conflicted feelings about your father," Neal suggested. "Adler is fulfilling his father's dream. You could be doing the same. Robert took advantage of Win-Win for his own purposes. You're simply following in his footsteps."

"Finally something useful is coming out of his misdeeds?" Henry's face darkened for a brief second. "I love it. The same could work for you."

"Like father like son?" Neal's chuckle had no humor in it. "I could refer to how my father was wronged. The system betrayed him. Now it's time for payback."

Henry and Neal wore nearly identical expressions, showing the scars of wounds which hadn't fully healed. Neal never talked about James. Had he meant what he said or was it simply a con to sell to Adler? Peter needed to have that conversation with him someday. His mother and Ellen were still in WITSEC. How much resentment was buried inside him, and who was it directed at?

Henry didn't respond to Neal's remark. He may have been too absorbed by his own unhappy memories to pay it much heed. "You and I will be the perfect recruits for Adler, but we shouldn't ignore the possibility that Adler may first strike at Peter to obtain leverage."

"Possible," Neal conceded, "but unlikely. Adler has no reason to think he could convert Peter. If he really wants us to work for him, he'll pick one of us as his target. My money's on Henry."

The odds-on favorite smiled. "How easy should I make it?"
After a smooth overnight flight from Paris, Neal checked himself, Peter, and Henry into their rooms at the Jeu de Paume hotel. Peter was growing used to the ambiance of flying first class. For the first time in recorded history, he actually slept on the plane. It was fortunate he had. There'd be no time for naps today. Even though it was Sunday, it was a work day.

Marcel Jauffret had offered to come to his office at National Police Headquarters to meet with them. Travis was already there, working with their tech staff. The real reason Travis was there he'd not revealed to his French counterparts, but Neal knew that by the time their plane touched ground, Travis already had his monitoring equipment in place.

When Neal checked his phone after landing, he found a text message from Mozzie. He was on site in Oberammergau. The chalet was occupied. He hoped to be able to peer in through the windows but so far curtains were obscuring his view. Mozzie was relying on his birdwatcher persona to mask his surveillance.

Neal and Peter's appointment was scheduled for noon. While they met with Marcel, Henry planned to touch base with Win-Win's French partners, Dufour Investigations. The small detective agency operated out of an office on the Right Bank close to Les Halles. As far as their partners were concerned, the group was investigating rumors about the missing masterpieces. That they were making sitting ducks of themselves in the process had not been divulged.

Marcel had a small untidy office at police headquarters. Art books and crime manuals shared space in the bookcase with photographs from his days of playing soccer. He'd brought in a couple of metal chairs for their use and placed them opposite his desk.

The last time they'd met face to face, Marcel had been skeptical of the existence of an undiscovered art cache. No longer. Once Mozzie deciphered the coded document, Peter had called him with the good news. So far Marcel had only shared the details with his superior officer. No one wanted to risk a leak.

"I've marked all the train routes the Nazis used during the war," Marcel said, gesturing to a large map spread out on his desk. "The lines go through Nancy, Troyes, and Dijon. There are several locations which had been favorite Resistance targets, particularly the bridges."

"According to the document we deciphered, the art was going to the Altaussee salt mines," Peter said, pointing on the map to the small town east of Salzburg.

Marcel nodded. "That's one of the most heavily traveled lines. It runs through Munich."

"Are there any records of the Resistance hiding art in the region?" Neal asked.

"I couldn't find any," Marcel admitted, "but the fighters could have been killed before they were able to inform anyone. Massacres of Resistance agents were routine. Over a hundred were executed in Besançon alone. That city was a center for the Resistance and could have provided the fighters. Perhaps a cave was used to store the paintings. There are numerous caves throughout the Jura Mountains in eastern France. It would have to be a small cave or mine shaft which isn't open to the public to escape discovery all these years. And as for the condition of the art after such a long time. . ." He executed a slow Gallic shrug.

Neal was counting on the best case scenario. Isabelle's friend René knew the value of the paintings and would have advocated for someplace dry and weatherproof. Bergmann must have thought their location was secure or he would have moved them. And perhaps he had.
"Have there been any inquiries about the Vermeer painting?" Peter asked.

"Only one," Marcel said. "It was a Belgian art historian. We had him checked out. He's legitimate. He was allowed to view Neal's forgery and didn't raise any questions."

Neal's cell phone buzzed. He took it out of his pocket to read the message, expecting it to be from Henry. But that was not to be.

Neal supposed he should feel relieved they'd predicted the event correctly, but it still caused his stomach to clench. The clock had just taken a gigantic leap forward.

"What is it?" Peter asked in an undertone.

"It's from Dubois. Henry didn't arrive at their office and he's not answering his phone."

Peter nodded, his lips tightening. "It's the logical gambit, but that doesn't make it any easier to hear."

"Would someone care to explain what's going on?" Marcel demanded, sounding aggrieved, "and please don't tell me this is yet another secret."

Neal didn't fault Marcel for his frustration, but left it to Peter to explain who Henry was and how they intended to smoke Adler out into the open. Although it could be Ydrus who'd kidnapped Henry, the fugitive hedge fund manager was much more likely. Henry had been wearing the watch which contained Adler's tracking device ever since he left his loft the previous evening. For someone with Adler's resources, he was an easy mark.

While Marcel vented about the idiocy of their plan, Neal attempted to contact Henry and had the expected futile results. Henry was now forty-five minutes late. By now, Adler could have hustled him onto a plane. He could be anywhere.

When Peter called Travis, he was already on his way to meet with them. Henry's cell phone was broadcasting a signal from the Tuileries Garden while his pen registered a location on the Rue de Rivoli. They couldn't both be right.

Marcel dispatched detectives to search both sites, using the coordinates Travis supplied them. They then regrouped in a conference room which Marcel appropriated as an ad hoc command center.

"Henry followed all the safety protocols we'd established," Travis reported. "He called me when he left the hotel and sent me a photo of the taxi's license information at the start of his trip."

"The cab driver may have been uninvolved," Marcel noted. "An accident could have been staged which forced him to stop. The route between your hotel and the detective agency is a short one. We may be able to find a witness."

Marcel's prediction proved accurate. The cab driver was located. He reported that they'd gotten caught in a traffic jam on the Rue de Rivoli. With traffic at an impasse, Henry paid the fare and exited the cab, saying he'd walk the rest of the way on foot. He must have been seized on the street. His pen was found in the curb.

Police detectives found Henry's cell phone at the base of a marble statue in the Tuileries garden. The famous statue depicted Cain in a state of remorse, his face covered by one of his hands. For a moment Neal's belief wavered. Could this be an Ydrus ploy after all? Was the symbolism of a man racked with guilt from having killed his brother a message from Adler or a reminder from Rolf of how Neal had betrayed Klaus?
Neal zoned out the flurry of activity around him. *Focus. Who was it?* Rolf usually accompanied acts with a message of some sort, but there had been nothing this time . . . so far. No card of a Lovecraft monster.

"You continue to think it's Adler?" Peter asked. He must have the same concerns.

"Broad daylight? Yeah, I do," Neal said. "Rolf would have included some bizarre reference to water. Henry's phone would probably have been dropped into a reflecting pool. This reminds me of how Mozzie was snatched off a street."

"Fowler made use of mafia members in New York," Peter said and turned to Marcel. "Does the Albanian mafia have much of a presence in Paris? We have reason to suspect Adler established himself in that country."

Marcel considered for a moment. "If Adler had affiliated himself with the Albanian mafia, most likely they'd provide him with Serbian contacts. We have several members of the Serbian mafia on our database. I can run a check."

Peter notified Jones. They were now on location in Albania and would watch for any traffic going in or out of the estate. The French would continue to search, but Neal had little hope they'd find anything. So far no witnesses had been found to the abduction.

They all knew what the next step would be. It was simply an issue of timing. Travis performed a system's check on Neal's watch to verify it was operating correctly.

Afterward Neal stood up. "I think I'll make a coffee run."

Marcel looked up. "The breakroom is down the hall."

"Thanks, but I'd like to get some fresh air." *And give Adler a chance to pick me up.*

Peter frowned at his words but didn't try to stop him. He knew it was Neal's turn at bat.

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**Notes:** Henry has been kidnapped and now Neal is inviting Adler to do the same. Peter's gut may never be the same. Next week in Chapter 15: Sunrise in Bavaria, an uninvited foe complicates the situation still further. Under the circumstances, it's not a surprise that Peter's attempt to relax into pirate mode isn't very successful. I've written about his challenges for the blog. The post is called: *Role-playing Games.*

Neal singing while loopy from drugs has a long history in Caffrey Conversation. The classic moment that inspired the references was in the season one episode *"Vital Signs"* when Neal sang *"Love Is a Many Splendored Thing."* In our series, Penna started the tradition in St. Louis with the first story, *Caffrey Conversation*, where Neal sang *"Little Drummer Boy."* My first story to feature a loopy Neal was in *The Golden Hen.* *"Up, Up and Away"* and *"I Feel Fine"* were in *An Evening with Genji.* *"Blackbird"* was in *Cinereous Skies.*

Sara tinted Neal's hair in *Caffrey Disclosure.* The possibility exists that Neal and Sara staged their remarks about hair for El's benefit to demonstrate that they were just pals. It would have been just like them.

*Peter's Tom Selleck look is an Easter egg to the mustache he had in the flashback episode *"Forging Bonds."* At the time El advised him to lose the mustache, calling him Magnum. Richard's version is
much more flattering.

Blog: Penna Nomen & Silbrith Conversation: www.pennasilbrithconversation.blogspot.com
Chapter Visuals and Music: The Harlequin's Shadow board on the Caffrey Conversation Pinterest website: www.pinterest.com/caffreycon
Sunrise in Bavaria


When Neal left police headquarters to pick up coffee at the café on the corner, he intended to make himself an easy target. Henry had been snatched. Adler would want him next. Here I am. Come and get me.

And that's what they did. He'd only strolled a few paces along the street when a panel van rolled to a stop next to him. Adler was no fool. He likely assumed Neal would make himself available and had positioned the van near the entrance.

Two men jumped out and muscled him into the vehicle. Neal didn't attempt to resist. He'd already clicked his pen and watch to transmission mode before he left the building. The pen was clamped to an inner pocket. No chance of it falling out.

Unfortunately Travis wouldn't be able to track him for long. When the wheel man merged into traffic, one of the abductors ordered Neal to strip. The man had a swarthy complexion and spoke in heavily accented English.

Neal was given a set of faded blue coveralls to put on. All his belongings, shoes and socks included, were placed in a trash bag. A hood was slipped over his head while his hands were zip tied behind his back. One of the gunmen ordered the driver to stop. Neal heard the sound of a door opening and the bag being lifted off the floor. He assumed its destination was the trash bin. He'd been half-expecting this and had worn old clothes, but still . . . He liked those shoes. He hoped they'd be recovered.

He was strapped into a seat and ordered not to move. Neal had a trick of telling himself the story of To Catch a Thief in order to keep track of time. He knew the approximate number of minutes needed to describe each scene. The movie was a hundred minutes long. He'd just gotten to the scene of John and Francie swimming in the ocean when the van stopped. That meant roughly forty-five minutes had elapsed. The last part of the drive was at high speed. They had to be well outside the city limits by now.

They weren't taking any chances with him. He was gripped on both sides by strong hands as he was guided out of the van. A gun was kept pressed against his back. Their concern was unnecessary. He had no intention of escaping.

A rap on wood then the faint snap of a bolt being released. The slight creak of an opening door. Neal was shoved inside before his hood was ripped off. Blinking his eyes at the unaccustomed brightness, he was greeted by the sight of Vincent Adler standing in front of him. Wearing a gray dress shirt and impeccably tailored black wool pants, Adler strode forward, a congenial smile on his face.

"Neal, it's been too long."

"I'd shake hands but—" Neal shrugged and glanced behind his shoulder.

"Gentlemen, untie him."

One of the guards took out a pocket knife from his jacket. Neal didn't make any smartass remarks. Those cords were tight. It would have been easy to slash his wrists instead of the plastic. But Vincent wasn't interested in maiming him, not yet anyway. Two quick slices and his hands were
Neal rubbed his wrists to restore circulation. "Much better, thanks."

"Take a seat, I insist," Adler said, gesturing to an upholstered armchair. "You must forgive the cavalier manner of my invitation."

"I quite understand," Neal murmured, prepared to be magnanimous. They were in the modest living room of a house, likely a vacation rental. The lack of personal touches such as photos was revealing.

A glass of cognac was on an end table beside a couch covered in a worn floral print. An open bottle of Courvoisier VSOP was next to it. Adler poured a second glass. "The surroundings are simpler than I would like, but this is only a rest stop."

Neal shrugged. "The exigencies of field camps."

"Exactly. I've been keeping up with your activities. You've been quite busy lately."

Neal didn't reply and took a small sip of the cognac. It didn't taste doctored, but the complex blend could easily disguise it. "I hear you've become interested in art acquisitions," he said, deflecting. "The Braque you purchased is a fine painting."

Adler smiled tolerantly. "You should be pleased with the fee you received for selling it. I hope you invested the money wisely."

"I learned from the best. I've made it a practice to avoid Ponzi schemes."

"Ah, we shouldn't let the past interfere with our present negotiations."

"What kind of negotiating do you have in mind? I hear you've lost one of your employees. Are you interested in recruiting me?"

"Fowler was a good man, but I have a new prospect whose potential could be even higher." Adler reached into his jacket pocket for his cell phone and made a few taps. He held it for Neal to view the image on the display—Henry. He appeared uninjured. He was facing the camera and had his expressionless stone-mask face on. He was wearing the same clothes he'd had on when Neal and Peter left to see Marcel. The photo must have been taken shortly after he was picked up. All Neal could see of the background was a white wall.

Neal hardened his jaw. Adler wanted a shocked reaction and that's what he gave him. He let his concern register on his face. "May I speak with him?"

"He's currently en route to his new home, but you can be assured I'll let you talk to him later. That is, as long as our new partnership proceeds as I hope it will. He hasn't been harmed and will be treated well. That will have to suffice for now. Perhaps you'd care to explain what happened on Friday evening."

Neal shrugged, not overplaying his worry for Henry. They'd already agreed that he and Henry were to act cocky and unfazed by minor glitches such as kidnappings. "Garrett Fowler and Joseph Ruiz were arrested."

"What happened to the art? Did you find the U-boat?"

"The time for pipedreams is over. There never was a U-boat." He didn't expect Adler to believe him right away. For his entire life, he'd believed in the lie Bergmann had invented for his soldiers. Others
must have also told him that the U-boat didn't exist.

"But the message on the painting?" Adler persisted.

"I added that just for you. You wanted a U-boat. I gave you the next best thing. Did you like it?" he added, blinking his eyes innocently.

Adler summoned up a half-smile, the disappointment registering on his face as it started to sink in that he'd been conned. "It was quite impressive. Since the painting's been damaged, I'd like my money back."

"I assumed the payment was reimbursement for the money you made off me from your Ponzi scheme. I'm sure you invested it wisely, and naturally would want me to have the full appreciated value. I'm not the type to hold a grudge. In light of the payment, I'm willing to let bygones be bygones."

"Purely as a business matter, answer me this. If there's no U-boat, why should I keep you and Henry alive?"

"Because there is a stockpile of looted art and I know where it is," Neal said confidently. At that Adler's eyes shone with the fire of an alcoholic who spotted a bottle of liquor within his grasp. "A letter to Bergmann's wife was hidden underneath the canvas of the Braque painting. It gives the directions to the treasure." Neal paused to take a sip of brandy, prolonging Adler's anticipation. "Bergmann invented the U-boat story to deceive the soldiers working for him. A clever ruse, you'll have to admit. Your father certainly fell for it."

"How did you discover the truth?"

"Old-fashioned research. When I discovered Bergmann's letter, I brought Henry in. You also played a part. I might never have found the letter if you hadn't expressed such a desire to own the painting. Henry's job allows him to travel throughout the world. Win-Win is no federal bureaucracy. He's able to pick his own destinations, set his own agenda. Germany was at the top of his list."

"That trip in June?"

Neal smiled. "We suspected you were monitoring us. Ruiz made a useful funnel for lies and innuendos. Surely there are no hard feelings. You should be flattered. We simply utilized your techniques."

Adler extended his left arm along the back of the couch, seemingly relaxed and confident—the image of a man fully in charge. "When you worked for me before, I knew you had potential. You're proving it now."

"Henry and I are open to partnership opportunities. We recognize your brilliance in finance. With our unique skills, we could make an unbeatable team." Neal was tempted to take another sip of brandy, but he was starting to feel drowsy. He didn't want to go under before he finished laying the groundwork. Instead he rotated the snifter slowly in his hand, prolonging the reveal. "Your hospitality in Argentina was deplorable. I hope you're treating Henry better this time."

"You have my word."

"Oh, I'll need much more than that."

"That can be arranged later. You say you know where the treasure is?" Adler leaned forward, a trace of urgency in his voice. Was he concerned that Neal would pass out before disclosing what he
knew? But then why would Vincent have drugged him? What if it were a truth serum? The consequences could be catastrophic.

Neal had only one option available but first he needed to salt the mine. "Bergmann wasn't so foolish as to reveal everything in the painting. His wife might have sold it, or it could have been destroyed during a bombing run."

Adler raised a brow. "Or some wiseass could have stolen it?"

Neal shrugged. "Anything's possible. Bergmann wisely hid the details in a separate location."

Adler placed his hands on his knees. "Where?"

"Are we partners?"

"Neal, have you grown cynical?"

Vincent was stalling. This wasn't the action of a man who thought Neal would keel over. In that case, he might have miscalculated the dose because Neal was feeling dizzier by the moment.

"You taught me well," Neal said, blinking his eyes as Adler split into two, no three images. "You'll need my help with the art but I won't work without Henry. Harm him, and the deal's off. Do you accept my terms?"

Adler raised his glass. "Let's drink to it, partner."

Neal tried to focus on one of the Adlers now sitting next to him and took a large sip. All he needed to communicate was the location then he could pass out.

"Where is our destination in this treasure hunt?" Adler asked.

"Near Oberammergau in the Bavarian Alps."

"Where exactly?"

*That's all you're gonna get.* Peter should have had enough time to prepare. No need to conceal his shakiness as he set the glass down on the table. He stared at Adler accusingly and stammered, "What did you—" before crashing sideways onto the floor. Maybe a tad too forcefully?

Adler was calling his name. He heard a loud thrumming sound in his ears before all went black.

**WCWCWCWCWCWCWC**

"You expected both Neal and his cousin to be kidnapped?" Marcel asked incredulously. He sat back in his chair in the small meeting room and looked at Peter like he was trying to decide whether he should throw him in irons or call for a straitjacket.

Travis arched an eyebrow at Peter, *I told you so* written plainly on his face. He was familiar with the plan and had voiced strong reservations. Peter could hardly fault him when he felt the same way.

"We already have agents in place in Albania," Peter explained. "We assumed that one of the cousins would be taken there to be used as leverage. The most likely target was Henry. We know Adler's location, but Albania doesn't have extradition treaties with the United States. Financial fraud in the United States doesn't carry much weight with the local authorities. If Adler could be charged with a capital crime, we'd have a stronger case."
"So now you plan to smoke him out and charge him with kidnapping?"

Peter nodded. "And possibly recover some lost masterpieces along the way. We have reason to believe Neal can find evidence of the art's location in Germany. He'll use that as a bargaining chip with Adler."

"Do the Germans know about this?"

Neal could have explained the cousins' wild scheme with a smirk and a deception, but Peter was cringing at having to admit what he'd agreed to. Marcel was being remarkably restrained under the circumstances.

"We don't have enough details to alert them," he admitted. "We're uncertain of the route and Adler must not suspect that Neal's being monitored."

"I suppose I should be grateful that you've let me in," Marcel said, shaking his head at the crazy Americans. "What do you want me to do?"

"We intend to track Neal's movements. If the plan works, Neal will lead Adler to the art's location which we assume most likely to be in eastern France. We'll need your assistance once they cross the border."

Marcel probably suspected their source was the same Resistance contact they'd used earlier, and Peter did nothing to dissuade him. Neal's involvement with the Braque had to remain a secret.

Travis wasn't much more enlightened than Marcel. He believed Isabelle had informed them that Bergmann owned the chalet in Oberammergau. Since none of the team knew about Neal stealing the Braque, it was the only way to make them aware of the location without incriminating him. Lying to the team members was not something Peter had ever contemplated having to do. He was grateful when Mozzie solved the issue. Without being asked, he took it upon himself to tell Travis about Isabelle last week.

Mozzie was now in Oberammergau. Travis had contacted him as soon as they discovered Neal had been abducted. Once Travis and Peter concluded their meeting with Marcel they'd join him at the stakeout. Neal was confident he could convince Adler to take him to the chalet by promising that the directions to the art cache were hidden there. Once they arrived, if Neal couldn't find anything inside, he'd lead Adler to the garden. Mozzie had prepared fake directions and placed them inside a vintage pottery garden gnome he'd purchased in Oberammergau.

Mozzie had written a letter in German, ostensibly from Bergmann to his wife Nina, where he told her about a cave in the French Jura Mountains northwest of Geneva. There were numerous caves in the region and it was conceivable one could have been used by the Resistance. It would then be Peter's task to rescue Neal before Adler realized he was on a wild goose chase.

It was an immense gamble. As of this morning, the chalet was still occupied. Neal intended to take Adler there but how? Peter would have gladly accepted Marcel's offer to go along in the plane and take two of his agents with him, but Mozzie was adamant against any government officials being involved until their return to France.

Instead, their paranoiac crew member had made arrangements with a "friend of a friend" to fly them to Oberammergau. Mozzie had instructed Peter to call André when they were ready to leave. Since André was involved, Peter assumed the pilot was someone in Gordon Taylor's employ—perhaps another instance of the exchange of favors Neal thought so highly of.
Once Peter and Travis collected their luggage, André drove them in his ancient Peugeot to a private airstrip east of Paris.

The pilot was a taciturn fellow who barely spoke English, but Travis seemed satisfied with his skill so Peter calmed his unease at having to rely on Mozzie's extended connections. When they touched down at a small airstrip outside Oberammergau in the early evening, the pilot drove them himself to the surveillance spot.

Mozzie had been keeping nonstop watch of the chalet since Peter reported Neal's abduction. Once in Oberammergau, he'd procured a Volkswagen bus. They would use it to follow Adler and Neal to the next location—either the fake one or the real treasure hoard. Someday Peter intended to ask Mozzie why all the vehicles he supplied looked like they were on their last legs. This one was a little better than most on the inside, but the dark blue exterior was coated with a thick layer of dried mud. How Mozzie had found enough mud to achieve the desired effect on a beautiful fall day in Bavaria escaped Peter, but that was low down on his list of worries.

The target of their surveillance was what to Peter's eyes looked like a typical chalet—white weatherboard construction with wide gables and natural wood balconies. The window boxes were bright with geraniums. Reinhard Geigner, the suspected son of Anton Bergmann, lived there with his wife. He worked as a banker in Hanover. One bit of luck—the Geigners had vacated it earlier that afternoon. Mozzie claimed to have had no hand in their departure, and there was no reason to doubt him. But it was the sort of coincidence that Peter had no faith in. Whatever. It worked to their advantage.

Hidden inside the van was the Braque which Mozzie had smuggled into the country on Saturday. When Travis left to check the chalet, Peter had Mozzie show him where the painting was concealed in the trunk.

Ever since Neal told Peter about his theft of the Braque, his guilty secret had become Peter's responsibility, too. For months Diana had been planting hints in her stories that Peter wanted to be recruited by Rolf. The team members assumed Peter was only pretending to be open to the offer. But the Braque demonstrated the razor-thin line he was treading. In order to protect Neal, he'd been an accomplice in concealing the theft and in smuggling the painting back into France. By his actions, Peter was as guilty as Neal and Mozzie. Returning that painting to the authorities couldn't happen quickly enough, but no matter how it was carried out, a huge degree of risk was involved. It was easier to ignore the Braque when Mozzie had it safely stored away in some secret bolt-hole. Now the Braque was traveling with them. Would it be an albatross around all their necks?

With difficulty, Peter yanked his focus onto the Matisse. Mozzie said he hadn't seen it, claiming he'd been forced to do all his surveillance from the outside. Was Mozzie telling Peter the truth? He said the house was protected with a security system which Neal would have no trouble in disarming. How could he have known unless he'd inspected it up close? Wouldn't he have been tempted to reconnoiter?

Peter couldn't act on his suspicions. He and Neal were both dependent on Mozzie's expertise. Any fallout would have to be dealt with at a later time.

WCWCWCWCWCWCWC

A rooster crowing in the dawn light heralded the promise of a spectacular morning. Neal strode quickly along the cobblestone lane toward the field. He could already see the painting in his mind—a flock of blackbirds flying low over a wheat field. The sun would be a shimmering luminescence at the fringe of a heavy cloud bank. He paused briefly to marvel at the parish church once more. Why had Auvers-sur-Oise been blessed with such extraordinary scenes? It was as if God had willed the
village to be designed for artists.

"Bonjour, Neal."

He spun around to see who'd called out to him. The straw hat he wore didn't prevent the sun from streaming into his eyes and he squinted to distinguish the woman's features. Her silk dress was much more elegant than the garb of the local village women. She carried a parasol which cast her face into shadows, but her blonde hair shone like spun gold. And that contralto voice. He was sure he knew it. "Forgive me, but have we met?"

She gave a soft chuckle. "Many times, chéri. What do you plan to paint today?"

He approached her, still puzzling over her name, but she soon distracted him with questions about his art. As they walked down the path to the field, she asked if she could watch him at work.

"Only if you'll allow me to include you in the painting."

When she smiled, he recognized her. Astrena. When had she arrived? The last time he'd seen her was in Paris. Before he could ask, she suggested a pose for herself: He'd never painted a nude in the field, but the idea was an intriguing one. Her dress draped over a fence...

"Neal, wake up. Can you hear me?"

"Not now," he mumbled. The vision was blurring. He must capture it before it vanished. Where were his paints? Astrena! Come back!

A hand on his shoulder. The voice more insistent. "Neal, open your eyes."

"You don't understand. The light will be wrong if I don't start—"

"Neal, it's me. It's Kate."

His eyes jerked open. A woman's face swam blurrily over him. Astrena? She was blonde. But her face looked different. Eyes the color of sapphire. "Who...?"

She leaned closer to him. "Don't you recognize me?" She gazed at him anxiously. "Don't let the blonde hair fool you. I'm Kate."

Why was Kate in Auvers-sur-Oise? His head throbbed painfully. Had he fallen asleep in the field? Where was Astrena? He closed his eyes again.

"How is he?" Not Kate. That was a man's voice. Someone Neal had known in another lifetime. But who?

"He's still out of it. He's hallucinating," Kate said. She sounded upset. "You told me that was a truth serum. All it did was knock him out," Neal felt a cool hand on his forehead. Gentle fingers stroked his brow. "He's running a fever."

"You worry too much. He'll be fine." Finally he recognized the voice. Vincent Adler. "We still have two hours before we arrive in Oberammergau. This should do the trick."

Neal heard a rustling sound and the rip of paper being torn. He gasped at the acrid smell of ammonia and sneezed. His nose stung. His eyes watering, he squeezed them tightly closed. Were smelling salts really necessary? He waited a minute before cracking his lids open. This time the world was
"Feeling better?" Kate asked. "Do you recognize me now?"

"When did you become a blonde?"

"We're all wearing disguises," Adler said. "You, too."

Neal glanced down. He was wearing the same workman's coveralls they'd given him earlier. He was lying on a padded quilt inside a small truck equipped to be a mover's van. He could feel hair on his neck. Whatever wig they'd slapped on was a long one. He wondered vaguely what he looked like.

Kate's blonde wig was shoulder length. Adler sported a mustache. "Is this the way you treat your new business partner?" Neal mumbled. "Where's the trust?"

"Until you've proven yourself, there is none. For your sake as well as your cousin's, you better be telling the truth."

Adler strode to the front of the truck which had been outfitted with a couple of captain's chairs facing the back. In the other chair was one of the guards from the house where he'd met with Adler. There were two men riding in the front cab. He could only see the backs of their heads.

Kate was still crouched beside him. "Would you like some water?" He could barely hear her over the noise of the engine.

His thoughts were disjointed and muzzy. Had he been dreaming that he was Van Gogh? What was it Astrena called him? Neal or Vincent? Could she read his thoughts?

Kate cupped his chin in her hand, forcing him to pay attention. "You need to drink. You'll feel better afterward." She put an arm around him and helped him prop himself against the side of the van.

While she opened a water bottle, Neal gazed down at his manacled hands. Not a speck of paint on them.

He took a small sip when she held the bottle to his lips, but the water made him nauseous. Closing his eyes, he leaned back against the side panel. Was he ill because of the drug or his dream? His feet were also manacled together. Electronic locks. No chance of picking them.

Was this a good time for the Way of the Orchid? Billy was a firm believer in the art of faking—not just death but injuries. Neal's lessons at the Aloha Emporium seemed a distant memory now. The way he felt, he didn't need to fake it. His dizziness wasn't going away. He ached like he was in the grips of a nasty bout of the flu.

He opened his eyes to find Kate watching him with concern. "What did you give me?"

"Some preparation Vincent got. You weren't supposed to lose consciousness, but you've been out for over twelve hours."

"You're looking good. He treating you okay?"

She nodded. "And he will you, too, once we have the art." She brought her face close to his. Her eyes were even more beautiful than he remembered. "Vincent says you know where the paintings are," she whispered. "Is that true?"

He nodded. "Even Raphael's Portrait of a Young Man. Finally I'll be able to give you that Raphael
original."

She gave a small smile. "When I heard about *St. George and the Dragon* being stolen, I wondered if you'd done it."

"Considered it," he admitted. "Someone else beat me to it. We're going to Oberammergau?"

She nodded. "You still have time to recover."

He shut his eyes. He heard Kate get up and walk to the front. She was talking with Vincent but their voices were too low for him to catch anything but a few words. The field was beckoning to him. Astrena was asking why he hadn't started painting . . .

WCWCWCWCWCWCWC

"Here we are—birding once more." Mozzie raised his mug of coffee to Peter. "Your skills under my tutelage will soon surpass Tricia's."

Peter made non-distinct rumbles. His previous birdwatching experience had been on Long Island when he and Mozzie ostensibly searched for Snow Buntings while being lookouts for Neal. Should he be pleased that he'd now graduated to Bluethroats and Stonechats? Mozzie had lectured on the subject for thirty minutes on the one in a million chance some passerby would ask what birds they'd seen. Peter fully intended to let Mozzie do all the talking.

Travis was sprawled on the grass, wisely ignoring Birdman. He'd returned a few minutes earlier from a foraging mission, bearing pastries from the local bakery as well as coffee, cheese, and a loaf of bread. They'd staked out a position on the country lane near a small thicket of trees which not only provided suitable habitat for birds but also for non-obtrusive surveillance.

There'd been no sign of Neal so far. Mozzie believed that Adler would make the trip to Oberammergau by car. At some point he would have acquired a truck large enough to hold the art Neal was promising to locate. Given the distance between Oberammergau and Paris, most likely Adler would arrive sometime in the morning.

Jones had phoned in a report from Albania. Late yesterday evening, a car had arrived at the estate, and the team had been able to catch a glimpse of Henry being led inside. They'd counted six people present, including a woman who appeared to be a cook. There had been no sightings of Adler or Kate. In addition to Jones and Diana, Sofia and Radha were being assisted by Win-Win's Greek partner and several of his fellow detectives. More than enough people to raid the premises. But plans would have to remain on hold until they could rescue Henry without endangering Neal.

Travis screwed his spotting scope onto a tripod and aimed it at a patch of woodlands next to the road, a likely spot for birds as well as any cars coming from town.

"Have I explained the mating rituals of the Siberian Bluethroat?" Mozzie asked.

"Please don't." Peter knew his request would be ignored but he had to try. His mustache itched. He longed to yank it off. Had Tom Selleck been as miserable as he was? Travis looked much more comfortable in his Viking disguise. Peter wished his had been ready on time. Mozzie was wearing a frizzled gray Afro and hadn't shaved for days. Birds could have nested in his hair. The Siberian Bluethroat no doubt would have loved it.

"The male sings from an exposed perch to tempt the shy, secretive female," Mozzie continued, undeterred. "While he serenades, he performs acrobatic dances in the air, a technique I've also often found conducive to success."
Travis snorted, not lifting his head from the scope. "Since when do you fly in the air?"

"Master Billy Feng has taught me many leaps which would astonish and amaze you. Would you like me to demonstrate?"

"What a shame we have to maintain our birdwatcher cover," Peter said. "That thrill will have to be postponed."

"Ah yes. Never mind. That gives me more time to describe the copulation practices. It's a little-known—"

"A car's coming!" Travis interrupted excitedly.

Peter whipped out his binoculars and surveyed the gray Volvo sedan as Travis photographed the license plate. "Two men inside. Neither one looks like Neal."

"That's not the car the family left in," Mozzie said. "This could be an advance team which was sent to case the premises. Adler must have a truck for the paintings. He's probably keeping Neal on ice till then. Unless . . ."

"Unless what?" Peter demanded when Mozzie fell silent.

"Did the Geigners rent out their chalet? That could present an intriguing challenge."


Neal was roused from sleep when the truck lurched to one side. He lay still, keeping his eyes closed.

"You worry too much. He's probably just allergic to the drug." The snarky voice was unmistakable. Vincent Adler.

"Neal never mentioned any allergies to me. He's running a fever. It could be the flu." Kate sounded genuinely concerned. "We should stop at a clinic to have him checked out."

Had he caught a bug? Given the choices, that wasn't a bad outcome. Then that dream about Auvers-sur-Oise could have been fever induced. The link to Astrena was at the back of his mind and manifested itself in a dream. An eminently rational explanation. So why didn't he believe that was all it was?

Instead, he was absolutely certain that if only he could have recreated the scene the way he imagined it, it would have been the finest work he'd ever painted. Even now as the memory faded, he itched to have brushes in hand. He'd squeeze some viridian green onto his palette . . .

His eyes snapped open with the acrid tang of ammonia assaulting his nostrils. "Enough with the smelling salts," he grumbled.

Vincent chuckled. "Then stay awake."

Neal slowly took stock of his surroundings. He was still lying on his bed of moving quilts. He felt shaky but the nausea had abated. The truck had stopped. Kate was crouched next to him, still wearing her blonde wig. If he'd felt better, he would have appreciated her gauze peasant blouse and skintight jeans. As it was, he was simply relieved to see a sympathetic smile, even if it was fake.

She unscrewed the cap from a bottle of mineral water and offered it to him. "You must be thirsty."

He nodded. Propping himself up against the back of the truck, he took cautious sips.
"We've arrived at Oberammergau," Adler said. "Where now?"

"First I need to speak with Henry."

"Nice try but I have a healthy respect for the cons you two run. Anything you say could be a coded message."

Sick or not, he wasn't budging. The effect was somewhat marred by not being able to cross his arms, but Neal's lips were zipped.

Vincent held out for a minute before giving in. "I'm willing to compromise. You better be as well." He jerked his head to one of the guards. "Roll up the door."

The rear door was already cracked. The guard raised it enough so Neal could see they were at a gas station. In the distance he could hear birds singing. A breeze brought in welcome fresh air.

"You'll note it's early morning," Adler allowed him to look at his watch which indicated it was eight fifteen. "I invited Henry to my villa midday yesterday." Adler went to his laptop which lay open on his chair. Bringing it over to Neal, he let him watch what appeared to be a live feed. It showed Henry in swim trunks, stretched out on a lounger in a swimming pool. He was reading a newspaper, with a drink of some sort in the cup holder beside him. The sun was low in the sky behind him. It could have been sunset but more likely it was early morning. There wouldn't have been time to stage it yesterday. Vincent spoke into a microphone. "Have him wave."

Neal heard a man's voice giving Henry the instructions. Henry said something, but Adler quickly muted the sound. Neal could see Henry wave at him. That would have to suffice. Just Neal's luck. Henry got to lounge in a swimming pool while he was confined to a smelly moving van.

"Enough with the procrastinating," Adler snapped. "Give us the address. There's a bakery next to the gas station. You and Kate can have a delicious meal while we check it out."

Did they have a car following them? That would have been smart, and there was nothing wrong with Adler's brain. He wouldn't be an idiot and drive a moving van to case out a location. He'd probably been riding with Kate in the air-conditioned luxury of a car for most of the trip, only entering the van to check on Neal.

"Bergmann's son owns a chalet west of town," Neal said.

At the mention of Bergmann, Adler's gaze sharpened. Now that he thought he was so close to the treasure, his obsession was dictating even more of his actions. Neal could take advantage of that.

"The chalet once belonged to Bergmann's wife. Nina was listed as one of the casualties from the bombing of Munich, but in reality she'd assumed another identity. That letter Bergmann wrote in Argentina probably never would have reached her even if he'd sent it." It wasn't necessary to give Adler the details, but they helped establish Neal's willingness to join Vincent's crew. "Nina is now deceased, but her son continues to use the house as a holiday retreat."

"How did you know about the painting?" Vincent demanded.

Neal had no intention of telling him about Klaus. "I was passing through town. I was bored. The chalet was there. I hit pay dirt."

Adler retrieved a map and Neal indicated the route that he needed to take. "Tell your driver to look for Feuchtenrainweg. That's a two-lane road you'll reach just after you cross a narrow creek called Enge Laine. The chalet will be on your left. It's the first chalet after you pass a monastery." Neal
"Neal gave you what he needed," Kate said. "Some of the guards will stay with us. You should remove the manacles. He's probably lost circulation in his legs, and he'll need to be able to walk when we're at the chalet."

She continued to hover close to Neal. Was she deliberately playing good cop?

"Very well." Adler gestured to one of the guards. "Release him." He turned to Neal. "You say you're eager to become a member of my team. Now's your time to prove it. My men are under orders to shoot you if you make any false move. Don't worry. They'll start with your left arm so you'll still be able to retrieve the directions. It's nothing personal. Simply a prudent business precaution."

Neal rubbed his wrists when the guard he'd decided to nickname Boris took the manacles off. He was built like a wrestler with the droopy eyes of a bloodhound. He had an anxious look about him as if he was trying to curry favor with Vincent. The other two were worse. Hellhounds by the looks of them.

The manacles hadn't been that tight, but Neal grimaced as if in pain. He needed to fake weakness. He already had Kate sold. Adler wouldn't be as susceptible, but apparently whatever bug he'd gotten would help. Kate said he had a fever and he did feel a little warm, but he couldn't be too ill. Then again, he hadn't tried to walk.

Adler rolled up the door of the van high enough to exit. Neal could see him enter a gray Volvo parked behind them. There were two men already in the sedan. That left three with Neal and Kate. He was under no delusions about her. He'd caught a glimpse of a small-caliber pistol in her purse. She wouldn't hesitate to use it.

Neal staggered when he stood up, flinging out a hand to hold onto the side of the truck for a few moments to stabilize his wobbly legs. No need an act. "Sorry," he mumbled to Kate. "Don't know what's wrong."

"You may be allergic to the drug Vincent used. It wasn't supposed to produce the reaction you had, but"—she shrugged helplessly—"it was supplied by the black market."

"And their testing standards may not be up to the FDA's? I'll manage." He glanced over at Boris. "How about an escort to the gas station? I'd like to freshen up before breakfast."

His man Boris grunted a surly acknowledgment. If he wanted to obtain a recommendation as a valet, he'd need to mend his ways. While Neal and Boris took off for the can, Kate went for breakfast supplies. Neal offered to go with her, but Boris's scowl squashed that enticing gambit into smithereens.

Now that Neal was able to move around, he felt more like himself. If he had a fever, it wasn't much of one. But he continued to exaggerate his weakness. Whatever he had—drug reaction, curse, or bug—was a gift he intended to exploit to the fullest. He surprised himself by feeling rather smug about having a psychic connection to a goddess as an option. He wondered how Sam was faring.

Neal could smell the coffee from inside the truck when Kate returned with picnic supplies. She'd bought poppy seed rolls and Tilsit cheese. The bakery had provided butter and marmalade in little containers. It looked like a feast. Neal hadn't eaten anything since breakfast the previous day, and his appetite returned with the aroma of the coffee.

They made cushions from the moving quilts and Kate spread out another to make a picnic cloth. She
handed him his coffee in a paper cup. "You'll have to wait till we arrive home for porcelain," she said regretfully.

"Is that what you normally use now? Only the best of everything?"

She nodded. "Just wait till you see the villa Vincent acquired! It's the life we dreamed out. We've been able to travel throughout Europe incognito. I can attend whichever fashion shows I wish. The finest wines, gourmet foods—this could be your life as well."

"Where is this paradise on earth?"

She smiled mischievously. "You'll find out soon enough." She clasped her hands around her knees and for a moment looked like the Kate of old.

He thought he'd taught her how to be a con artist. Instead she'd played him throughout his time with Adler. First Leila, then Kate. Klaus had been right. Neal had been a fool to wear his heart on his sleeve. Now he was burying it deep—in the deepest darkness of Molasses Swamp. He'd finally seen the light. Charting the course of love was a game of Candy Land. Mozzie would approve.

"I know the coffee's not the finest roast, but it's not bad," she said, regarding him anxiously.

"We can imagine we're drinking it on the Champs-Elysées," he said, raising his cup to her in a mock toast.

"You won't need to pretend much longer." Kate slid next to him, resting her back on the side panel. "We've gone through so much—both of us—to get to where we are today. Vincent stands ready to give us everything we want."

Her lips parted, her cheeks flushed—she looked completely sincere. Was she? She might have constructed a fantasy world where she thought she could hold onto him as well as Adler. He smeared some butter on his roll and chewed thoughtfully.

Boris the Bloodhound was keeping a close watch on them. Kate had brought him breakfast, too. The other guards were outside the van. They could all relax. Neal wasn't going anywhere. He wanted to lead Adler straight to the chalet. Peter and Travis must have joined Mozzie by now and were monitoring the chalet. White Collar and Win-Win agents should be in position to rescue Henry.

She snuggled next to him. "You're being very quiet. Are you feeling any better?"

"The food—and particularly the company—are providing a miracle cure. I was just thinking about the art which will soon be ours."

They spent breakfast speculating over which masterpieces they'd find and what they'd do with them. Kate had convinced Adler to keep the originals while selling the forgeries Neal would make of them. They intended to take advantage of the groundwork Mozzie had done in spreading rumors about the U-boat. With the money, Kate wanted to purchase a villa near Nice and an apartment in Paris. The girl knew how to spend money. By the time Adler returned, she'd already accounted for several million.

"We're in luck," Adler reported. "No one's home. You assured me you know where the directions are. For Henry's sake you better be right."
Notes: Pressures build from all sides as we near the endgame. I hope you'll join me next week when Neal finally gets to revisit the chalet.

A few notes about this chapter: Peter's previous birding adventure with Mozzie was in The Mirror. The painting Neal imagines is based on Van Gogh's Wheat Field with Crows. Van Gogh is the subject of this week's blog—Artistic Easter Eggs: Van Gogh. Most previous references in my stories to Van Gogh have concerned Starry Night, but Wheat Field with Crows carries a darker significance.

Blog: Penna Nomen & Silbrith Conversation: www.pennasilbrithconversation.blogspot.com
Chapter Visuals and Music: The Harlequin's Shadow board on the Caffrey Conversation Pinterest website: www.pinterest.com/caffreycon
Treasure Hunt


Neal was handcuffed once more for the drive to the chalet despite his protests that he wasn't about to escape. While he had the thrill of riding in the van with Boris the Bloodhound and the other guards, Kate and Adler rode in the sedan where he was undoubtedly grilling her on what she'd learned from Neal.

Did Kate think Neal was still in love with her? He'd given her a few subtle hints, hoping to stoke any lingering embers. He'd take all the allies he could get, even the treacherous ones.

He wished he could have seen the road during the drive but he was instead forced to imagine the mountainous terrain. When they arrived at the chalet, his pal Boris finally condescended to remove his manacles. Neal was still shaky. When he didn't immediately bounce up, Boris grabbed him by the collar and gave him a boost. Neal ramped up his weakness, holding onto the side of the truck as he slowly walked to the back. He took his time to scramble awkwardly off the tailgate and faked a trip. Boris had to grab onto him to keep him from falling.

They were parked in front on a circular drive. The chalet was in a small clearing surrounded by tall firs. There were no vehicles that he could see but the curve in the road limited visibility. The trees provided good concealment. Neal took a moment to imagine Mozzie, Peter, and Travis hiding among them. Were they wearing their disguises? How grouchy was Peter about his mustache? It was reassuring to think they were monitoring him, recording his every move.

Boris was walking to his right. Other guards were behind him. Neal used his left hand on his pants leg to tap a Morse code message and hoped his friends would see it. B-R-I-D-G-E. His safe word. Don't be fooled by my act. No need for the cavalry.

Travis had prepared tracking devices to place under Vincent's car. He was a firm believer in redundancy. He would have brought along extras in case one failed. He'd have ample for two vehicles. The team was doing their job. It was up to Neal to do his—find those directions.

Adler had an arsenal of tools for Neal to use to disable the alarm. Some of them he wouldn't mind having for his personal collection. He hoped to confiscate them after the con.

The security alarm was the same one which was in place when Klaus and Neal entered the house four years ago. Klaus had demonstrated a neat trick to disarm it by slipping paper between the top of the door and the doorframe.

"You have any paper with you?" Neal asked.

Adler's brow furrowed. "What do you need paper for?"

"I assume you don't want me to set off the alarm. Didn't you have a pad of paper in the truck?"

Adler grunted and ordered a guard a fetch it. Neal waited patiently. The pad of white ruled paper would work well for what he had in mind.

He might not have remembered the directions to the chalet but now that he was standing before the door, the details from their previous break-in returned in sharp focus. He could picture Klaus beside him, expounding on various techniques to prevent an alarm from sounding. Back then, Klaus had made him use six sheets of paper to cover the entire width of the door. That wasn't necessary this
time since Neal already knew the location of the sensor.

With an easy smile at Kate, he demonstrated the trick. Adler appeared to enjoy their banter. He was probably already daydreaming about future scams he'd pull with him and Henry on board.

Once the paper was in place, Neal picked the lock. Holding the paper in place, he swung the door open. Instructing Kate to keep the paper in contact with the sensor, Neal set to work on opening the security console inside.

"A neat trick," Adler said. "You always were adept with paper. Do you still make origami?"

Neal nodded as he detached the final wire. "If you'd given me the use of my hands, I would have made a pirate's cutlass for this job." He stood back. "You can remove the paper now." He turned around to inspect the interior of the chalet.

Adler wasn't taking any chances. He ordered two guards to remain outside while the others stayed with him and Kate. Neal noted the telltale bulge of a gun in Adler's jacket and assumed Kate was still carrying hers. They were meant for each other. Neal hoped they'd enjoy being pen pals when they were in prison.

He returned his focus to the house. Somewhere within its rooms were hidden the directions. Neal zoned out the others as he shifted into the persona of Anton Bergmann. It was no longer 2005 but May of 1942. He'd returned home after inspecting the art the Resistance fighters had stolen from the train. He'd made sure no one followed him. The secret was his alone.

The previous night he'd presented two of the paintings to his wife. Even though she thought they were copies, Nina had been overjoyed. Her slender fingers pulled him into an embrace and they'd celebrated with a night of passion which reignited his earlier feelings for her. He cast aside all thoughts of his Parisian mistress Isabelle. Last night there was only Nina in his heart.

Could he have both? Anton's career was on the rise. The Fuhrer himself had recognized his talent and promised him a top spot in the administration after the war. He might even be able to continue in Paris and maintain his mistress.

And if the Fuhrer should fail, Anton's future was still secure. He knew he wasn't alone in making contingency plans. Already ratlines were being discussed among his fellow officers. His priest in Paris had mentioned that Cardinal Maglione in Rome was paving the way for Catholics to emigrate to Argentina. Argentine sympathizers in Paris promised to expedite trips for any Germans wishing to go to the New World. A welcoming refuge in the worst-case scenario. For who could predict how the war would end?

Anton wouldn't tell Nina about the treasure now. She was an innocent. His little violinist. She might not understand what he'd done. With time she'd come to realize that he'd saved the art, not just for them, but for the world. After all, it was only natural that he should receive remuneration for his efforts.

The next few years were impossible to predict. If he had to leave quickly, he'd need to rely on Nina to recover the art. Under those dire circumstances, she'd understand that he'd kept it secret for her own protection. She'd retrieve the paintings and then join him in Argentina.

Now, where to hide the instructions?

Neal scanned the living room, ignoring the guards who were watching every move he made. The furnishings hadn't changed much since his previous visit. The front door opened directly into a large
living area. A massive stone fireplace with a storage area for logs dominated one wall. Dark taupe leather sectionals surrounded a rustic cocktail table. Polished hardwood floors. The Braque had hung on a side wall. Neal noted it had been replaced by a print. He took a moment to examine it. Ernst Kirchner—one of his mountain landscapes.

It was possible Anton had hidden directions in the wall behind the Braque, but it seemed unlikely. He would have had to patch the drywall without Nina's knowledge. Neal was convinced she never knew about the art. If she'd retrieved the paintings, surely word would have leaked out about at least one of them.

"Where do you think you're going?" Adler demanded as Neal headed for the dining room.

"We know Bergmann gave his wife one of the looted paintings. He may have given her more." Neal paused to grin impudently at him. "You really aren't very good at treasure hunts."

"But I am!" Kate exclaimed, her cheeks flushed. Treasure fever had her in its grasp. In her desire to find loot, she'd be less observant of his movements.

"Neal's right," she said. "We need to check the entire house. We have plenty of time. No one knows we're here. C'mon on, Vincent." She pushed past Neal to enter the dining room first.

The Matisse depicted a woman holding a violin. It would have conveyed a personal message to Nina. She might have wanted it in her bedroom or studio. Even though she'd passed away, conceivably her son could have kept it there for her. Perhaps he identified the painting with his mother.

Neal turned toward the exposed staircase which led upstairs. His shadow Boris was close on his heels. Neal climbed two steps and paused, sagging against the railing as a wave of lightheadedness took over. Damn. Not now. For a moment he wondered if he was living the con so much, his body experienced a sympathetic reaction. Whatever. He could use it to his advantage.

Boris placed a hand on Neal's back to steady him. He was starting to like Boris. The guy was just trying to earn a living. Was there a little Boris at home? Neal shook off the weakness and continued upstairs.

Three rooms and a bathroom opened onto the hallway. One of the rooms, evidently the master bedroom, was much larger, and there she was. The Matisse.

Or not.

It was clear from the moment he spotted it that it was a copy. It wasn't bad, but no one with much of an eye would have been fooled. What had happened to the original? Did Anton give a copy to his wife?

The painting was hanging next to the window. Neal strode over to examine it more closely. The canvas hadn't been aged long enough.

"Is that a Matisse?" Adler demanded. He and Kate were standing in the doorway.

"A copy of one." Neal hung the painting back on the wall. "And a modern one at that. Not worth our time." He turned back. "The hunt continues." He returned to the hallway with the others in tow.

The second bedroom was a nondescript guest room with modern furniture. Neal didn't waste much time there. He'd return for a more thorough search if nothing else turned up.
The third room looked more promising. It was now an office, but perhaps once it had been Nina's studio. There was a large window overlooking the hillside. Neal imagined her standing by the window as she played the violin. He paused at the doorway to survey the room, and there, perched in an alcove, was what he'd been seeking.

"Neal, what is it?" Kate demanded.

He didn't answer but sprinted for the recess in the wall. No one could touch it before him. Carefully, he picked up the two-foot high bronze sculpture of a deconstructed violin and rotated it slowly in his hands.

Kate joined him. "You think the message is hidden inside?" she whispered.

He nodded. The sculpture evoked the Cubism in Braque's painting. The violin had been sliced into four sections. Each piece was set at an angle, providing gaps where a rolled-up piece of paper could be slipped inside. For a violinist with agile fingers, it wouldn't be much of a challenge to retrieve it.

Neal placed the violin on the desk and set the toolkit alongside it. He took one of the sheets of paper Vincent had given him and tore it into strips of different widths. Carefully he inserted two of them into the cavity. The strips wouldn't help extract messages but he was counting on them as a contingency measure.

He assumed there'd be a map inside. Probably also instructions or directions. The text would be in German. Neal didn't think that Adler was familiar with the language but Kate might have learned it or one of the guards could speak it.

If Adler acquired everything, he'd have no reason to keep Neal alive. All that talk of future partnerships was spun cotton candy with no substance. He'd cheated Neal before. He'd do it again.

Neal had brought to Paris a vial of liquid which could make text illegible. He'd lost the vial along with his other hidden tools when his abductors dumped his clothes. But he still had the Way of the Orchid. He hoped to replace the directions with one of his strips of paper and destroy the original before Vincent realized what he was doing. The lessons he'd been taking with Billy had heightened his skill. He was about to put them to the test.

Retrieving a pair of tweezers, Neal set to work on the delicate operation. He felt like a surgeon surrounded by his colleagues. Unlike the other sections, the base of the violin was solid, making it the most likely hiding spot.

Neal probed the cavity with tweezers. It only took a second to find something soft and pliable. With infinite care he extracted a roll of paper secured in a scrap of black silk stocking.

He and Kate beamed at each other. Had this delicate piece of hosiery belonged to Nina or Isabelle? It was now his.

Adler approached to snatch it away, but Neal held it firmly in his fist. "Not so fast, partner. The paper's old, likely in poor condition. We're so close. Don't ruin it now."

Kate reinforced Neal's argument. She was acting on his side now. The key word was *acting*, but it was a skilled performance. Making him sit down, that fake concern about his health . . . she was playing into Neal's hands.

Neal spread another sheet of paper on the desk and laid the packet on top. Using a pair of scissors, he gently sliced the stocking open. He could already tell there was a map inside but there was also another piece of paper. Adler and Kate were both leaning over the desk to watch while Boris and the
other guards stood in the doorway.

The six-inch-square map had been folded and rolled into a flattened cigarette shape. Once Neal spread it out, Vincent pounced on it, providing Neal the opportunity to study the second sheet of paper. The directions were in German. While Vincent's attention was on the map, Neal memorized every word. To keep them distracted, he asked, "Is that Besançon?"

"Yes," Kate confirmed. "Have you ever heard of Osselle?"

Neal gave a gasped exclamation, drawing their attention to his head and away from his hands which were compressing the directions into a tiny ball. One of the strips of paper he'd made served as a decoy. "Is that where it is? Of course!"

"What do you mean?"

"Osselle is a famous network of caves. There are miles of them. If the Resistance had found a hidden gallery, it would make a perfect hiding spot. Are the caves marked on the map?"

Kate studied it. "The map appears to be traced from a geologic survey. The roads aren't labeled."

"There are likely several different possible routes which could access the caverns," Neal said. He had no idea if that was true, but he wanted them focused on the map, not him.

Adler barked orders to one of the guards to retrieve a map from the Volvo. Taking advantage of their distraction, Neal slipped the wadded ball into his mouth. Bending low over the decoy paper as if studying it, he had more than enough time to swallow the directions before the jig was up.

"What's on the other sheet of paper?" Adler demanded, looking up.

"The precise directions." Neal continued to pretend to scan it. "In German, of course." He looked up. "You do speak German, don't you?"

Adler exhaled noisily and scanned the guards. "Hey! Any of you speak German?"

"I think Lukasz does," rumbled Boris. "He's keeping watch outside."

Adler held out his hand. "Neal, give me the paper now." A veiled threat was in his order.

"My pleasure." Neal handed him the decoy sheet.

He took one look and flushed red with anger. "What game are you trying to pull? This is blank!"

Neal shrugged. "Nothing personal, but you've screwed me in the past. Our partnership will work much better if we have a level playing field. You have Henry. I have the directions. Without them, you'll never find the art. Those caves are open to the public. No one's discovered the paintings up to now. Only I know how to find them." He crossed his arms.

"Search him!" Adler ordered.

"It won't do you any good. I've already swallowed them." Of course Adler wouldn't take him at his word. Neal had to submit to having his mouth examined, but he knew that wouldn't suffice.

One strip search later, Adler was forced to accept reality. Neal didn't mind raising a cocky eyebrow at Kate during the search. She'd chosen Vincent over him? What was the girl thinking? But it was all for the best now.
By now he had several guns leveled at him. "You think you bought yourself a pass?" Adler hissed. "Why should I believe there actually were directions?"

"You have the map," Neal said calmly. "You saw there was a second sheet of paper. It wasn't blank. Bring Henry here. I'll take everyone to the art."

"Unacceptable." Despite the glowers, Neal knew he was safe for the moment. Adler was even more consumed by treasure fever than Kate. He wouldn't kill Neal—not until Neal had led him to the cave.

Adler exhaled, apparently reining in his anger. "Once we arrive at the site, I'll allow you to talk with him. I'll even order his guards not to hurt him. You can hear it all. Acceptable?"

It would have to be. From the video feed he'd seen, Henry was likely in Albania at Adler's retreat. It would take too long to bring him here.

"And I know you'll understand, partner, why it's necessary for me to drug you for the trip," Adler added.

Kate broke in. "Is that wise after what happened before? This time, Neal's reaction could be even more extreme. He may not be in any shape to lead us to the paintings."

"It won't be the same drug," Vincent said, dismissing her concern.

The first one had been designed to be a truth serum and hadn't worked. What would this one do? It was probably meant to be a knock-out drug. Would it also conjure a visit from Astrena?

"How many hours to Besançon?" Adler asked Boris.

"About six."

"We can't take a risk of Neal being unconscious," Kate protested. "What if we're stopped at the border for inspection?"

"That's a risk we'll have to take," Vincent said grimly. "He's too good an escape artist. I haven't forgotten the reports you gave me of the heists you pulled together. I have no intention of riding in that truck the entire way, and I won't risk being tricked again."

A couple of hours earlier.

When a gray car passed their location, Peter ordered Mozzie and Travis inside the van. They'd be able to observe the chalet via surveillance feeds. The night before, Travis had set up remote monitoring equipment around the perimeter. The cameras combined with their high-powered binoculars should provide adequate coverage, but Peter was braced for the glitch which appeared inevitable whenever Neal was involved.

His hope that Neal was inside the sedan was quickly dashed. Mozzie's prediction that hired help would be sent to perform the initial reconnaissance appeared accurate. No chance that either of the two men who exited the car was Neal in disguise. Both were shorter. They were dressed in casual clothes. They had swarthy complexions, perhaps indicating they came from one of the Mediterranean countries. After ringing the doorbell at the front door repeatedly, they went around to the back of the house.

When the men drove off, Mozzie took off his headset and gave a thumbs up. "They will report to their nest that no predators are about. The main flight will lift off any moment now. We should move
into position."

Travis looked at him, puzzled. "Are you comparing them to geese?"

"Hardly. For this con, House Martins are our best indicators. Advance scouts survey the terrain then report back to the flock." Mozzie wagged a finger at them which Peter yearned to swat down. "Much is to be learned from our feathered friends."

With Mozzie firmly entrenched in birdwatcher mode, Peter resigned himself to another lecture. He supposed it could be worse. Despite Travis being present, Mozzie hadn't launched into his latest theories on extraterrestrial slime.

The previous night had been much more enjoyable. They'd stretched out on blankets and stargazed while comparing favorite science fiction movies. In comparison with the constant background noises of Brooklyn, the quiet of the German countryside seemed otherworldly.

By the time the Volvo reappeared, they'd already moved into position near the chalet. Dense firs provided excellent cover.

Peter could see two men in the front seat. A blonde woman was in the back. This time the car wasn't alone. A large white rental truck marked with the logo of Sixt, a European rental company, followed closely behind.

Was this the glitch Peter had been expecting? They now had two vehicles to follow. Travis had brought enough tracking devices to place on both undercarriages, but what if the vehicles drove off in different directions? Was this karma for not having brought in the German police?

The Volvo pulled first into the driveway. The passengers in the Volvo exited before anyone left the truck.

"That's Kate," Mozzie murmured. "Don't let the blonde wig fool you."

"And there's Adler," Travis added. Despite the mustache, he was readily recognizable. They didn't appear to be wearing prosthetics.

Mozzie glanced over at Peter. "You can breathe now, Suit. It's going as we expected."

"I haven't seen Neal yet," Peter whispered back. "And how will we monitor two vehicles?"

"We won't need to," Travis said. "I brought along a few extra tricks." He patted the nylon backpack next to him. "A little crushed cork mixed with silicone carbide in the gas tank will make them think they have engine trouble. We'd already planned to sneak up to the vehicles to plant the trackers. With a little luck I should be able to dump in enough additive to give them a major headache. If I have the time, I can also loosen a few key bolts with a wrench." He opened the pack and began pulling out the tools to take with him.

Mozzie beamed at him. "Another shared interest! We must discuss further."

"Later," Peter ordered. "Disable the Volvo. Make them use the truck."

"Wise move," murmured Mozzie approvingly. "That truck implies they believe they'll have loot to transport. We don't want to sabotage their hope."

The driver exited the cab of the truck and rolled up the back door. A heavyset man in coveralls jumped out from the interior. He turned around and waited for another who was helping a young
man out—Neal. He was walking unsteadily. Was that real or fake? Neal had warned he might feign being injured or sick. He was wearing coveralls and had a wig which made him look like Orlando Bloom in *Pirates of the Caribbean* minus the mustache.

Adler had a healthy respect for him. Neal was surrounded by four men. One of them kept an arm at Neal's back. Peter suspected there was a gun in his hand although he couldn't see it. Neal's left index finger tapped a code on his pants leg as he walked toward the house. Peter breathed easier as he spelled out the letters: *B-R-I-D-G-E.*

"You got that?" Travis whispered.

"Yeah, you two head out. I'll keep watch."

Mozzie and Travis began to creep toward the vehicles. Everyone was wearing earpieces connected to two-way radios to communicate with each other. Peter kept his binoculars on Neal and the guards. Both he and Travis were armed. As for Mozzie, who knew? Not for the first time, Peter wished he'd stuck by his original plan to bring in the Germans. Hell of an op. Sending two men, one a civilian, toward armed thugs with your consultant being held at gunpoint. Mozzie had told him it would all work out. Yeah, and Hell was an ice rink.

The firs were thick with branches down to ground level but at some point Travis and Mozzie would need to cross open land. They'd have to time it perfectly. Both men wore old khaki clothes. They were prepared to claim they were birders slinking after the elusive Yellowhammer, whatever that was.

In the meantime, Neal was working on the front door. Peter scrutinized him with his binoculars. He looked paler than normal but there was no indication of injuries.

Good man. He had the door open. *Keep this moving, Neal.*

Three of Adler's thugs entered the chalet along with Neal, Adler, and Kate. That left two guards outside. From his vantage point, Peter watched as Mozzie and Travis crept through the trees to the vehicles. Mozzie immediately dove under the truck, while Travis slid under the Volvo. For the guards to watch the vehicles, they'd have the sun in their eyes. Not surprisingly, they opted to slouch on a rustic bench in front and ignore the vehicles.

Mozzie and Travis returned before anyone came out.

"Any problems?" Peter asked.

"None," Travis said, opening up his nylon backpack. He slipped the wrench inside the toolbox. "We placed cell phone jammers on both vehicles as well as tracking devices, but they shouldn't be necessary on the Volvo."

How much time would Adler give Neal to search the premises? The garden gnome containing the fake instructions was in the backyard near the northwest corner of the chalet. If Neal made a move in that direction when they exited, Peter would immediately get on the phone to the Germans. Hobhouse had given him contact information for the Bavarian State Police. Peter would need to arrange for roadblocks while they followed the truck.

Mozzie grabbed Peter's shoulder. "The door's opening!"

Breathlessly, Peter watched to see where Neal would head. Mozzie and Travis had their eyes glued on him as well. Neal walked straight toward the truck without even glancing toward the back. Kate looked jubilant. Adler's expression was difficult to read.
Peter kept his eyes peeled on Neal hands. One of them was hidden from view, but his right hand dangled loosely at his side, the third finger tapping a code.

"O-S-S-E-L-L-E," Travis murmured as Neal tapped. "Is that right?"

Mozzie was gulping but no sound came out.

"That's what I got as well," Peter said. Neal climbed into the back of the truck with three of the guards. A fourth got in the driver's seat. Adler and Kate got into the Volvo with their driver.

"Mozzie, start talking."

"Osselle is a town near Besançon," Mozzie finally sputtered. "It's also an elaborate network of caves, one of the most famous in the world. It was rumored to be a gold mine in Roman times. Does it hold treasure once more?" His eyes shone like headlamps through his glasses. "Gentlemen, the hunt is on!"

As they hightailed it through the trees to their van, Peter heard a car engine start up, then gasp as if it had an asthma attack. Travis was grinning like a teenager. The car sputtered and stalled for a couple of minutes before it gave up the ghost for good.

Adler didn't waste time. The truck rumbled past them as they reached their vehicle.

"How fast can this bus go?" Peter asked, calculating the odds of their muddy relic falling apart before they arrived in France.

Mozzie smiled. "She may look like an Old Betsy but she has the heart of a thoroughbred."

He wasn't exaggerating. When he pushed his foot on the accelerator, the Volkswagen bus took off like it had rocket fuel inside. One small problem—Mozzie drove in the opposite direction to the one taken by the truck carrying Neal and Adler.

"Relax, Suit, I know what I am doing. Travis, keep him calm."

"Stop immediately," Peter ordered. "I'll drive."

"Impossible. I'm the only one who can finesse the speeds we'll need. Observe and learn from the master."

Travis leaned forward from the back seat to murmur in Peter's ear. "He's got a plan. You'll like it."

Peter suppressed most of his growls as Mozzie turned onto a side road which appeared to circle back to Oberammergau and sped through the turns like a race car driver. Peter gripped onto the armrest with a death grip. Was this the way Neal felt when Peter drove? In the future, he wouldn't give Neal such a hard time.

As they approached the town's outskirts, Peter broke into a grin. "You could have told me."

Mozzie snickered. "What and spoil the surprise?" He pulled into a gas station which was equipped with an automatic car wash. The odds of Adler's men recognizing the van as the same wreck which had been parked alongside the road were now non-existent. Not only was the mud washed off but also a temporary layer of dark blue paint. The van which left the parking lot was a sparkling white vehicle which looked like a thousand others.

Thanks to the tracking device and Mozzie's maniacal driving ability, they quickly caught up to Adler's truck. They were able to stay a comfortable distance behind, since Travis could predict their
route.

There were two main routes to the caves which were southeast of Besançon. It was slightly shorter to travel via Switzerland on the way to France, but Adler chose the other option. By crossing the Rhine from Germany to Alsace in France, he could avoid a second border control point.

Once Adler committed himself to the Rhine option, Peter was able to call in reinforcements. He'd alerted Marcel earlier in the day about their progress. It was now time to plot their next move.

Initially, Peter had hoped to be able to pass Neal a bug during a rest stop, but they had no way of knowing in advance which rest stop Adler would pick. Marcel suggested an alternative. Normally vehicles weren't required to stop at the border control point, but inspections were mandated during heightened alerts. And that was what Adler was about to face.

Marcel offered to fabricate a report of a known terrorist attempting to cross into France. Once they were close enough to the border that there was no chance of Adler selecting an alternate route, Mozzie, the Red Baron of the autobahn, could easily beat the slower moving truck to the control point. Marcel was already on his way and would meet them there with a uniform for Peter to wear for his role of border control agent. For this, he could tolerate wearing his disguise a while longer.

During the drive to the control point, Mozzie gave them an impromptu lecture about the cave.

"Was it ever a salt mine like the ones Nazis used to store art?" Travis asked.

"No, although there are salt springs in the area. The Osselle cave has been known since the early Middle Ages. During the French Revolution it was used as a refuge by priests. They even conducted mass in the caves."

"Caverns in my experience are damp places," Peter said. "What are the odds the paintings would have survived without major damage?"

"Unknown," Mozzie admitted, "but certain galleries are quite dry. They were used as banquet halls during the eighteenth century so conditions can't be too unfavorable."

"Marcel told me that new galleries are still being discovered," Peter added. "He speculates that the Resistance knew of an unknown gallery and used it as a hiding spot. Without a tunnel to connect it to the known galleries, its presence would be unknown."

Midmorning Jones phoned in a report from Albania. They'd performed a reconnaissance and had their plan in place to rescue Henry. Jones had jamming equipment ready to deploy which would knock out cell phone transmissions.

With Neal embedded in Adler's crew, there was no need for Henry to be a hostage. Peter gave the order to go ahead. One less pirate to worry about was a good thing.

Marcel had argued forcefully to arrest Adler at the border. Adler could now be charged with kidnapping both Henry and Neal in addition to the financial fraud he'd committed earlier. Fowler could possibly be persuaded to testify against Adler in which case they could add criminal espionage to the list.

The major stumbling block was that no one knew who was aware of the precise location of the stolen art. Had Adler discovered the directions or Neal? If it was Adler, he'd never cough them up.

And there was another reason—one he couldn't share with Marcel. If the French took command of the recovery operation, the chance to sneak in the Braque painting would vanish. That was not a
determining factor, but it weighed on Peter's mind.

Even stronger was the fact that they'd yet to capture the Mansfelds. Until they'd ensnared them, their work wasn't done. The U-boat con had been designed by Jones, Henry, and Mozzie. Peter had already outlined the next phase. For his plan to work, he and Neal would have to be present when the paintings were recovered.

Marcel knew he had something in mind, but didn't know the details yet. Neal only knew part of it. Everything depended on what happened in Osselle.

Notes: Mozzie's description of the caves at Osselle is accurate, but evidence of the Resistance using them is murky. The treasure hunt continues next week when we return to France. Will Neal find the art? Will Mozzie avoid crashing the car? Will Peter's disguise fool Adler? Will Astrena reappear and throw a monkey wrench in everyone's plans? The answers are coming next week.

While you're waiting, you may wish to answer some questions of a different sort. For this week's blog post I prepared another Caffrey Conversation Trivia Challenge. The theme is Walt Disney movies. Many thanks to Penna for helping me comb through our stories for references. Pirates of the Caribbean and Treasure Hunt have been featured in this story, but we've sneaked in many others.

If you're interested in the violin sculpture Neal found, it resembles a bronze by Arman which is pinned to the Pinterest board. There are also pins of the chalet and surroundings in Oberammergau.

Blog: Penna Nomen & Silbrith Conversation: www.pennasilbrithconversation.blogspot.com
Chapter Visuals and Music: The Harlequin's Shadow board on the Caffrey Conversation Pinterest website: www.pinterest.com/caffreycon
The pungent aroma of ammonia assaulted Neal's nostrils, startling him awake. His eyes watered as he blinked to focus.

"Enough with the smelling salts," he grumbled, fighting the urge to heave. For a moment he considered it. It would serve them right. But they'd probably make him clean it up.

"You only have yourself to blame," Adler said coolly. "If you'd demonstrated your trust by giving me the directions, I wouldn't have needed to drug you."

Kate passed him a bottle of water. "Drink this. It will help."

The truck was rumbling along at a steady clip. The motion didn't make him feel inclined to try anything, but he took enough water to wet his lips. The drug he'd been given appeared to be different from the first one. The nausea was worse. Boris the Bloodhound had rammed a needle into his arm as soon as they were in the truck. And just when he'd started to like the guy.

Neal was back on his familiar nest of moving quilts. "How long have I been out this time?" he asked Kate.

"About four hours. The radio reported there's a bottleneck at the border due to a terrorism alert. All vehicles are being checked."

"Don't try anything funny," Adler warned. "Henry's counting on you."

"Once we're through the control point, we'll pick up some food," she added. She took out a comb from her purse and passed it through his hair. "The wig looks good on you. You should let your hair grow out."

Neal raised his handcuffed hands to feel his chin. He'd seen his appearance in a mirror at the chalet. The hair was his color but about shoulder length. Not bad for a pirate. His scruff would add to the effect.

He reclined back on the side of the truck, taking small sips of the water. He remembered vaguely some kind of commotion when they left the chalet, but he passed out before finding out what was going on.

"Why aren't you and Vincent riding in the car?" he asked.

"Engine trouble," she said. "It sounded like a lovesick Banshee when the driver started the engine. We'd filled up at a gas station in Oberammergau. Vincent thinks there was something wrong with the fuel. We've been riding all this time in the truck with you."

"It's just as well," Adler said. "More eyes to verify you don't pull another fast one."

Had that been Mozzie or Travis at work? Neal longed for the details. He was counting on that being a confirmation that the team was in place and had seen his Morse code signals. Would they have gone ahead and freed Henry? He'd feel a lot better about the con if Henry was safe.

Travis had mentioned that he planned to put a cell phone jammer on the truck. Adler hadn't
attempted to use his phone since Neal regained consciousness. Had he already tried and failed? He'd promised to let Neal talk to Henry at Osselle. Neal hoped that by then the golden goose had already flown the coop.

The radio report was correct about the traffic jam. Traffic ground to a halt at the Rhine checkpoint. Neal knew the drill. He was supposedly a Slovak worker hired to assist with a move. Adler chose the nationality, assuming that the border agents didn't speak the language. Neal wished he could see his identity papers. He assumed Kate had prepared them in advance. How improved were her counterfeiting skills? She'd had two years to practice since their time together.

When the agents boarded the truck and Neal recognized Peter in his Tom Selleck disguise, rainbows broke out. Peter had mentioned he'd try to take advantage of a border crossing, but a thousand things could have gone wrong.

Peter wouldn't have a chance to pass Neal anything even though Neal's handcuffs had been removed since Boris had Neal's papers. But while Peter ostensibly inspected the quilts for hidden terrorists, he tapped out a code on the leg closest to Neal. H FREE.

Neal didn't dare make a response, not even with his eyes. Kate was watching his face too closely. But that meant she wasn't watching his fingers. He tapped out the Morse T-U for thank you, and BRIDGE on the leg of his coveralls.

With Henry safe, it had become a chess match between Neal and Adler. Peter must have joined forces with Marcel. The cavalry would be following them all the way.

Once they left border control, Adler was true to his word, and stopped to pick up food. Here they were in Alsace and Neal was forced to eat American fast food. That was worse torture than the smelling salts, but at least the nausea had dissipated. The driver continued driving toward Besançon while the rest of them ate. Adler took a seat in the back close to Neal and demanded answers.

"There's a narrow road we'll take once we're past the cave entrance," Neal explained, knowing he'd have to supply Adler with a few crumbs. "It leads into the forest. A chain of caves extends for miles underground. Many of them are not open to the public. The Resistance made use of an undocumented cave. They appropriated one of the old stone huts along the road to disguise the entrance." Neal paused to take a bite of burger. Holding it in his hands was difficult. They'd handcuffed him once more after leaving the border. "That's all you get for now. After I talk with Henry, I'll lead you to the art."

Adler scowled. "That won't be possible. I can't reach them."

"The no-signal excuse? Surely you can do better than that. Let me see your phone."

He hesitated then held it up. He was right. There were no bars visible on the display. "We'll try again when we reach the hut."

"What assurance do I have you haven't harmed Henry?" According to Peter, Henry was already safe but Adler would be suspicious if Neal didn't demand to speak with him. Besides, he was curious to see how Adler would respond.

"Give me some credit. He's my ticket to keep you in line. And even without you, he's worth far more to me alive than dead."

"That's not the way you felt in Argentina."

"You don't actually believe Kate set Henry free without my knowledge?" Adler turned to her. "Tell
him, my dear."

She shrugged. "I know you're not surprised to hear it was a setup."

"That's right. I'm not. But I wanted to hear you admit it."

"So you got your wish," Adler said dismissively. "Now that we're on the same page, you realize that I've no reason to injure Henry . . . yet. Unless, you don't produce."

"I'll need to see where we are on the road before I can direct you," Neal warned.

Adler grudgingly let Neal sit next to the driver, but he had to share the seat with Boris who kept a gun pressed to his side the entire time. Neal's complaints that the bumpy road could lead to an unfortunate end to their partnership went unanswered.

It was early evening when the driver pulled onto the road leading to the huts. They drove about five miles into the forest before Neal found the old stone cross marker Anton had mentioned in his notes to Nina. And there, only a few yards away, just as Anton had described it, was a hut built next to a steep hillside. Neal broke into a grin. No need to hide his elation. They'd found the entrance to the treasure cave.

A cluster of huts along the road marked the remnants of a village. All were in disrepair—some of them mere crumbling piles of stone. The one Anton described was closest to the stone cross.

Kate was as excited as Neal, and that seemed to calm Adler's jitters. He appeared to realize there was no need to worry about Neal pulling anything. He didn't argue when Neal asked for his handcuffs to be removed.

In the back of his mind, Neal wondered how many French officers were tailing them now. Peter would have made sure they were all far enough behind to not be spotted. There was only the one road leading to the huts. The police could easily erect a barricade to stop them when they left, but would Neal be in the truck? His so-called partnership with Adler was already on shaky grounds. Once Adler had the treasure, he'd likely decide to cancel it on the spot.

When they jumped out of the truck, Adler ordered two of the guards to guard it while the rest of them reconnoitered. Dusk was falling, but he'd brought along ample flashlights.

The entrance to the hut was boarded up. An Entrée Interdite sign had been pasted on the doorframe. There was no historical or cultural marker. To all appearances it was a dilapidated farmer's shed. Too small to be used as a home, it had perhaps served to store produce or it may have been a temporary shelter during harvest season.

Neal's heart was pounding to rip through his rib cage. Adler, Kate, the police—they'd all become insignificant. He could picture the crates in front of him. Would they look like the fake ones they'd made? Those had been based on what the Monuments Men found. These should be no different unless the Resistance fighters had repacked them.

The guards made quick work of prying the boards off the entrance. When Neal walked inside, field mice scurried away, startled at having their house invaded. A large wasp nest had been constructed in the interior. An old steel-frame single bed was in a corner of the room. The mattress had been mostly eaten away. A dilapidated wood storage cabinet was against the far wall, its shelves empty. A small oak table and chair were the only other pieces of furniture. No discarded cans or litter to indicate anyone had used it for a long time. There were also no footprints on the dust-covered floor. Any belongings had most likely been stolen long ago.
Neal headed for the storage cabinet. He checked the interior and, as expected, found it empty. He attempted to shove it aside, but it was heavier than it looked. Boris lent his weight and together they were able to dislodge it.

"What are you looking for?" Adler demanded.

Neal ignored him. Dusting off his hands, he requested a flashlight.

"I'll provide illumination," Kate said. "Where do you want it?"

He paused to smile at her and murmured, "Ask me that later."

She grinned and for a moment looked like when she ran cons with him and Mozzie. He kissed those memories goodbye. They, like Kate, no longer had any hold on him.

He directed her to shine the light on the back wall. Like the others, it was composed of stones roughly mortared together. The directions indicated to look for a small X cut into the mortar and press the stone immediately beneath it. Bergmann wrote it was roughly one and a half meters up the wall and one-third of the way in from the northeast corner of the room.

Neal smoothed the mortar with his fingers as he studied the area in question. Nothing looked like an X. Stepping back, he let his eyes unfocus, patiently waiting till it popped into view.

And it did.

It had been partly concealed under a cobweb. Neal turned to Kate and winked. "X marks the spot."

He pressed his hand onto the stone. It made a rough grinding sound as it sank into a depression till a loud click was heard. Within the cavity he found a recess wide enough to insert his fingers. The door opened with painful slowness as he pulled with both hands. Once its outline emerged from the surrounding wall, Boris yanked on the leading edge as long disused hinges began to swivel. The screech of rusted metal was painful to hear.

Adler watched slack-mouthed as the opening was revealed. A thin façade of stone sheathed the metal door. Heavy hinges held it to a wood frame concealed within the wall.

Neal made a sweeping gesture. "The treasure cave awaits. Kate, would you like to join me?"

"You couldn't keep me away!" she exclaimed, darting forward.

Adler was right behind them as they entered the pitch-black interior. A narrow passageway opened up into a cavity barely high enough to stand in. Thin wooden crates were stacked against the walls. Flashing his light around the walls, Neal counted at least ten crates of varying dimensions. They were marked with the Nazi swastika and Imperial Eagle, indicating the fighters had left them in their original crates. That was likely for the best as they were destined to be eventually displayed in Hitler's museum and would have been carefully wrapped.

Adler's shove in the back brought Neal back to reality. He ordered Neal to carry the crates out to the guards waiting in the hut who would take them to the truck. Kate was to supervise their placement in the cargo hold. She slanted a quick worried look at Neal. Was she trying to warn him?

If so, it was unnecessary. He already knew.

Adler had no intention of Neal leaving alive. After the cave was emptied, he could conk Neal on the head, shut him up in the cave, and slam the door shut. Could the door be opened from the inside?
Not likely if Adler moved the storage cabinet back into position. There were no electronic bugs to pick up the panic word, but Neal's brain was shouting river to anyone who could hear it.

Neal worked as slowly as he dared to give the cavalry time to organize, but Adler wasn't providing him any breaks. One guard had been standing at the cave entrance, providing illumination, but when Neal brought out the sixth crate, Adler himself was at the entrance.

"Keep moving," he ordered roughly, one hand holding a flashlight, the other a gun.

"The truck’s about fifty yards away. It would speed things up if you’d let me help carry the crates outside."

Adler didn't take him up on the offer. Had he smelled a rat? Had the takedown already started?

When Neal returned with the seventh crate, Adler ordered him to set it down. "Something’s not right. Put your hands on your head."

Adler had the gun aimed squarely at him. Neal did as he was told.

"Walk toward the truck," he hissed. "No funny stuff. I have absolutely no need to keep you alive."

"This isn't a promising sign for our partnership," Neal complained.

"You know that was never going to work out," he said, with a sharp prod to his back. "Move it!"

That was what Neal intended to do, but he needed to wait till they were outside. He assumed they were under surveillance with night-vision binoculars. The police wouldn't be hampered by the dark conditions.

The hoot of a lone owl was the only sound they heard when they exited the hut. Mozzie sometimes employed bird calls. Was it a signal? They'd gone five paces, when Neal heard the most welcome voice in the world.

"Freeze!" Peter commanded. "You're surrounded." Neal could make out several other shapes but it was too dark to recognize anyone.

When Adler didn't drop his gun, Neal used a move Billy had taught him. He ducked, spun around while lashing out to kick where it would hurt most, then dove for cover.

WCWCWCWCWCWCWC

On September 12, 2005 at 7:35 p.m. Vincent Adler and Kate Moreau were taken into custody. Peter paused typing. He wouldn't have time to finish the report, but that was one line he couldn't wait to document. Marcel had assembled a crack team of French agents to assist in the takedown. The five guards, Kate, and Adler had all been captured without a shot being fired and there were no serious injuries.

Peter didn't have much time to tease Neal about looking like Orlando Bloom. He'd stripped off his wig before they finished reading Adler his rights. Peter along with Mozzie and Travis had already removed their disguises. The mustache was gone as soon as they crossed the border into France.

Neal reported that Adler had used a couple of drugs on him which knocked him out, but claimed not to be suffering any ill effects. Since he appeared to be okay, Peter didn't press.

Mozzie took off in the Volkswagen shortly after the cave had been emptied, muttering to Peter he'd
meet up with them later in town. The rest of the team rode with Marcel in a police van to Besançon where they'd process the suspects and the art. As they entered the ancient city, Marcel pointed out the Citadel, an eighteenth century fortress. During the war, it had been turned into a garrison by the Nazis and was the site of numerous executions of Resistance fighters.

The paintings were taken to a secure room within police headquarters to be uncrated. Marcel had brought along Odette Paquin, an art specialist who served as liaison to the French museum association. She was an unfamiliar face but she'd worked with Marcel on the theft of *The Astronomer*. She'd proved her trustworthiness on the Vermeer. Peter would need to rely on her and Marcel's discretion once more.

Neal and Odette unpacked the paintings while Marcel and Peter documented the discoveries and Travis recorded the proceedings. No one else was in the room. That was at Peter's request. The second phase of the op had already begun.

Peter couldn't follow Odette and Neal's running conversion, but judging by their looks of excitement and happiness, the long period of concealment hadn't damaged the art in any significant way. Some restoration work would be necessary, but the cave was dry and the paintings had been carefully packed. By the time all the crates were emptied, fourteen works were propped against the walls. They included all the art listed on the shipping manifest: Murillo's *St. Justa*, Pissarro's *Rue de Village*, *Harlequin and Columbine*, Raphael's *Portrait of a Young Man*, along with works by Matisse, Van Gogh and Renoir. It gave Peter particular satisfaction to see a work by Georges Braque—*Violin and Candlestick*—also displayed against a wall. Somehow Mozzie had spirited it into a crate with a Degas when the suspects were being processed.

When it was over, Neal gave a small nod to Peter, his face a mixture of exhaustion and triumph. He wasn't alone. They'd been able to experience the once-in-a-lifetime exhilaration of being modern Monuments Men. The satisfaction of recovering the art along with capturing Adler . . . Peter wished he could bottle up the feeling to share with El and the other members of the team. He could only imagine the joy Neal must be feeling as an artist. He and Odette were drifting from one painting to the other as if trying to imprint each one indelibly into their memory.

But time was short, and there were vital details to be ironed out.

"Are you ready to discuss that plan you've been working on?" Marcel asked, casting him a shrewd glance.

Peter nodded. "I'd like you to hold off releasing news about two of the paintings—the Raphael self-portrait and the Renoir of the woman reading a book."

"How long do we need to delay?" Marcel asked.

"No more than two months. You've already agreed to delay the disclosure of the theft of *The Astronomer*. If we're successful, you'll be able to announce its recovery along with these two paintings by December. There will be no risk to the works. You can continue to safeguard them."

"You intend to use them to con Ydrus?" Travis asked.

Peter nodded. "Neal had painted a forgery of the Degas work, *Harlequin and Columbine*, which was instrumental in capturing Adler and Kramer. I'd like the flexibility for a repeat performance."

Neal shot him a speculative glance. The Raphael was particularly significant given Neal's history with the artist's works. Klaus had stolen Raphael's *St. George and the Dragon* because of Neal's connection to Raphael. The self-portrait had been listed on the shipping manifest, a copy of which
Kramer must have transmitted to Ydrus.

With so many masterworks which they could go ahead and announce, it didn't take much effort to persuade Marcel. After securing his agreement, Peter directed Travis to take additional photos of both the front and back of the two paintings in question.

When the paintings were being prepared for transport, Peter conferred with Neal and Travis in a side room. Neal already knew about his intentions for the Renoir but he hadn't heard about the Raphael.

"We've already laid the groundwork that I've become dissatisfied with the Bureau," Peter explained. "Assuming Kramer relayed the reports, Ydrus knows I've become a big spender. What if I siphoned off two of the paintings?"

Neal smiled. "Stealing two paintings from under the watchful eyes of the French? That would make you irresistible to the brothers."

"That's what I'm counting on. The Renoir will be a gift to El. The Mansfelds are already well aware of your fondness of Raphael. It would be just like you to convince me to keep it as well."

"But don't forget, Neal is still the primary target," Travis warned. "Once the news about the discovery is released, they'll have no reason to delay approaching him."

"That's what I'm counting on," Peter said. "When we're back in New York with the rest of the team, I'll outline the details. But first we'll need to soothe the Germans."

"Have they been informed about Oberammergau?" Neal asked.

"John Hobhouse called them from London this afternoon while we were tailing you," Peter said. "By now they must have confiscated the Volvo and collected the monitoring equipment. I don't know what they've told the homeowners. We'll find out when Travis and I meet with them tomorrow in Freiburg."

"We've arranged to stay here overnight," Travis added. "We'll rent a car for the trip to Germany and then fly home from there on Wednesday."

"How do you intend to explain what happened?" Neal asked.

"We'll tell them the truth," Travis said blandly. "We were following an abducted agent who led us to Oberammergau. We weren't sure of the location till you arrived there. It was Adler who ordered the break-in and the only items which were taken were the directions."

"The Germans will need to know that Mrs. Geigner was actually Mrs. Bergmann," Peter said, "but we'll keep Isabelle's name out of it. The Germans will be delighted to have more of the plundered art recovered. I don't expect we'll have any issues with them."

"Henry intends to fly back from Albania on Thursday," Travis said. "He's staying with the team to document evidence from Adler's estate. Albanian officials are already at the site."

"If you don't need me, I'd like to head back to Paris tonight," Neal said. "I'll ride back with Mozzie. We'd like to see Isabelle in the morning. There's an afternoon flight from Paris I can catch to go home."

"Don't you want to stay in Besançon overnight?" Travis asked.

"I'll sleep in the car. I need to get back to New York." He shrugged wryly. "I have a full day of
classes on Wednesday and a master class to present that evening."

"Glad to hear you're not thinking of slacking off," Peter said with mock severity. "But you might as well admit the real reason you're driving back overnight. If you visit Isabelle you'll be able to return to Auvers-sur-Oise. You'll have more time to sketch and channel your inner Van Gogh."

Neal shot him a quick glance. "Actually, taking a break to sit in class sounds good to me after the past couple of days."

Peter studied him for a moment. Under the harsh fluorescent lighting of the police station, Neal was showing the effects of the ordeal. He was slumped in a chair, looking more like road kill than a pirate who'd just recovered a priceless fortune.

"You sure you don't need a checkup?" Peter asked.

Neal dismissed it with a wave of his hand. "No need. I'll see Christie later this week."

Peter didn't comment since Marcel entered the room to discuss the news release. But afterward Peter pulled him aside. Christie had given Neal a clean bill of health last week. He wasn't due to see her again so soon.

"Did something happen I should be aware of?"

"Yeah, in the truck. It might have been because of the drug, but I don't think so." Neal described how he'd dreamed he was Van Gogh and had awakened with an irresistible urge to paint. Even more unsettling was his conviction that the woman who'd been in the dream was Astrena. Under other circumstances, Peter would have been inclined to dismiss it as drug-induced. But Kate had believed he was running a fever, and from the way Neal described his condition, something caused him to be physically ill.

"How do you feel now?"

"Not great," he admitted. "You know me. I should be floating in the stratosphere from recovering the paintings. Instead I just want to crash somewhere and sleep. That's not normal."

"No, it's not." Neal was worried, and he wasn't alone.

**WCWCWCWCWCWCWCWCWCWCWCWCWC**

Mozzie didn't accompany Neal to New York since he wanted to visit Camille Souchon in Bergerac before returning. Camille had been Paul Lévy's secretary. When Mozzie tracked her down in July, he persuaded her to tell him about the fractal code Lévy had invented.

It was fitting that so many women played a key role in the recovery of the plundered paintings. Rose Valland, who oversaw the collection at the Jeu de Paume museum and was responsible for saving thousands of works of art, would have been proud of them. Camille, Isabelle, even Nina Bergmann had a part to play. Nina probably never knew about the duplicity of her husband. But if he hadn't given her two of the paintings, the others would most likely never have been discovered.

Now Isabelle had her revenge. Huber and Adler, along with their associates, would all serve time. Kate would likely get off with a much lighter sentence, but her dream was shattered. Kate, Leila—they both thought they'd never be caught. That's the way he used to feel too.

The only cloud on the art recovery horizon was the missing Matisse painting. Two possibilities struck Neal as most likely. Klaus must have been intrigued by the high price Adler offered for the
Braque. He might have returned to the chalet and realized there was another prize to be snatched.

Or Mozzie could have lifted it. According to the timeline Peter outlined, Mozzie had been alone conducting surveillance on Sunday till Peter and Travis showed up that evening. The Geigner family had left earlier in the day. Peter had arrived in the early evening, leaving him plenty of time. Mozzie was acquainted with many forgers who were capable of painting the low-grade copy Neal found.

He could have considered the Matisse payment for his assistance. Perhaps he intended it to keep it. Neal knew Mozzie possessed valuable autographed manuscripts and memorabilia. He'd snuck into a corrupt music publisher's house last summer to make off with his collection, and the items had never surfaced.

Neal didn't know where Mozzie stored his treasures, and he'd never ask. They couldn't have recovered the art without Mozzie's help. If he'd claimed the Matisse as a reward, so be it. But Neal hoped that wasn't the case.

When the day came that they captured Klaus, perhaps they'd find the Matisse along with the other paintings he'd stolen. The painting was beautiful. It should be on display where it could be admired by the world.

Neal slept through the flight to New York. It was early evening by the time he arrived at the mansion. The house was quiet. June was away visiting her daughter Vanessa. He felt restless and out of phase. Now that he was home, the decision he'd made during the flight didn't seem as clear-cut. Tonight was his best chance to talk it through.

He tapped a speed-dial number on his phone. "I just got back. Would you like some company?"

He heard Sara let out a breath of air at the sound of his voice. Had she suspected he and Henry had made targets of themselves? How difficult had the weekend been for her?

"I'd love it. Have you had dinner yet?" she asked, adopting his casual tone. She must have a thousand questions. He appreciated her not deluging him with them immediately.

"I'll pick something up on the way," he offered.

"Not this time. Give me thirty minutes and I'll have it ready."

"I'll need an hour for the scenic route."

Nothing these days was simple. He was under a constant threat of being tailed by Ydrus, particularly now that news of the art discovery had been released. Neal headed for Low Library on campus where he donned his disguise in a men's room—a tawny-blond wig with highlights. It was on the disheveled side with hair falling untidily over his forehead, a simple but effective transformation.

When he arrived at Sara's apartment, her warm green eyes wrapped him into an embrace before her arms did. Sara was barefoot and in leggings. He'd worn his plum t-shirt and was in jeans. He breathed in her scent, a subtle fragrance of jasmine and sandalwood. As he kissed her, his resolve faltered. Had he waited too late to pull back? His body was already protesting the insanity of the move.

Stepping back, she brushed the hair off his forehead. "It's a good look for you, Matthew. Alicia approves. But we're inside now and I prefer Neal."

He gladly stripped off the wig and placed it on a side table, where it looked like a tawny long-haired guinea pig. "Matthew can go play with Alicia's blond mop."
"Great idea! I'll be right back." She raced to her bedroom and returned with "Alicia" in the crook of her arm. Placing the wig next to his, she nodded with satisfaction. "There. They look very happy together. As for you . . ." She frowned as she studied him. "Several hours of rest are what you need. Come sit on the couch. I'll get us some wine."

Neal didn't attempt to hide his exhaustion. Now that he was at Sara's place, fatigue grabbed him by the throat. He hoped he could manage to stay awake through dinner.

Sara might not be able to cook but her taste in takeout food was excellent. She'd found a new place and had ordered cashew kale Caesar salad and a shrimp linguini. She fixed plates for them to eat while sitting on the sofa.

Neal couldn't tell her everything that happened. But that still left plenty to discuss—the kidnappings, the chalet, the secret opening to the cave, and, of course, the art. While they ate, he described the glimpses he'd had of Besançon. "I wish I'd had time to see more of the city. There's a historic district you would love. The setting along the river is idyllic. I read about it while waiting at Orly airport for my flight home. The art museum has some outstanding works."

"You'll have to make a return trip. Won't you need to do research for your doctorate?"

"That's what I'm counting on." He refilled her glass with wine as he described his joy at seeing the lost masterpieces. He couldn't mention the Raphael but he longed to describe it to her. His history with the Braque would have to remain a secret too, for Peter's sake as well as his. Unbidden another painting popped into his mind—the wheat field he'd imagined in the truck. Was that a signal it was time?

Sara was looking at him worriedly. She knew something was wrong. "Astrena was in my head again," he admitted. He hadn't told her about the occurrence a week ago, hoping it was a random incident, but he could no longer keep her in the dark. Sara should have the chance to call a timeout. He'd be conning Bianka. The Mansfelds and Ydrus could launch their attack at any moment. With so much chaos around him, it wasn't fair to her. Back out now, Sara, before you get hurt.

As Neal described the episodes, the fear he saw come into her eyes reinforced the decision he'd made. He paused to take a breath. "That's why I came to see you tonight. Under the circumstances, it's best that we put our dating on hold."

She placed a hand over his mouth. "Stop. You're exhausted or you'd realize what a truly bad idea that is."

"You don't understand. I've got Astrena in my head, Bianka knocking on the door, and the Leopard patrolling the perimeter. Once I'm free and clear—"

She shook her head vehemently. "Listen to me. No one knows about us. Not Klaus, not Rolf, not Bianka, not Astrena. We've already lost too much time. Everything you told me only serves to reinforce my belief that we shouldn't squander an instant."

She drew him into a kiss which he couldn't have pulled out of even if he wanted to.

Some days later when they separated, she said, "I'll take that as confirmation we're in agreement. Look how happy Matthew and Alicia are cozying up to each other. We can't break them up."

He wasn't about to let a wig outdo him in the snuggling department. That sofa was meant for lounging. Before long they were reclining side by side. She played with his hair while various body parts made intriguing suggestions for a follow-up. But there was no hurry. The evening was theirs . .
He had no idea when he fell asleep, but when he woke up she was no longer in the room. It wasn't late—only nine o'clock. He called out and when she didn't reply, walked toward her bedroom.

He heard her on the phone. From her tone of voice, it sounded work related and he retreated to the living room. There was a book on the side table. When he saw the author was Cecilia Hepburn, he picked it up. That was Chloe's pen name. He knew she wrote urban fantasies, but had never read any. The book's title was *Mandrake's Kiss*. Sara had mentioned it in Cape May.

He flopped on the sofa and began skimming through the pages. Chloe's novels were set in modern times. They featured a young witch named Zoe Alderwood who solved crimes through her knowledge of potions and spells. She'd formed an alliance with an enigmatic adventurer named Ravensword. Mozzie's girlfriend Janet had confided that when Chloe first met Dean Winchester, she realized he was the embodiment of Ravensword. Reportedly, Zoe and Ravensword's relationship was a steamy one, not unlike Chloe and Dean's.

Neal settled in to read . . .

"I hope the phone didn't wake you," Sara commented, walking into the room.

"No. I'm sorry I crashed on you."

"No apology necessary. It's the middle of the night in France. Your body's ready for bed."

How right she was, but the cause wasn't jet lag.

"What do you think of Chloe's book?" she asked, a sly smile forming. Had she read his mind?

He set it aside and gestured for her to sit next to him. "Ravensword has some good moves, I'll grant you, but Chloe could use some help in describing the swordplay."

She slipped a hand under his shirt and began feathering her fingers over his chest. "Is that so? Chloe told me Dean was quite an expert with a machete."

"A machete is all right, I suppose, for vampires," he said, stroking the hollow in her neck, "but it can't compare with a saber for elegance or finesse."

"I haven't forgotten you're an expert fencer. I'm looking forward to a demonstration."

He pulled her closer. "Whenever you'd like, I'm up for it."

"Tonight's probably out of the question. You're tired."

"Not that tired."

*WCWCWCWCWCWCWC*

Early dawn light was beginning to stream through the window when Sara awoke. She stretched out an arm. Instead of the sheet, she felt a warm body next to her.

Neal.

With a rush, the events of the previous night came back. She propped herself up on one elbow to study him. He was still sound asleep, and she was glad she hadn't awakened him. He still looked tired . . . and happy.
Their passion had been overwhelming and exhilarating. They'd stripped off their banter, masks, and aliases along with their clothes. The remnants of the walls separating them disintegrated, leaving behind emotions intense and visceral. As far as she was concerned, last night their fates were sealed. No matter what obstacles were tossed their way, they were forever intertwined.

"Hey," he said, smiling sleepily. "You okay?"

"I'm perfect now." She leaned down to kiss him. "Any bad dreams?"

He pulled her down next to him. "I only dreamed of you. Seeing you next to me makes me feel like I'm still dreaming." Even half-asleep his eyes were dark with need. They were reflections of her own desire.

His first class at Columbia was hours off. She could be late to work or call in sick. The only person important in her life was lying next to her. The world outside would simply have to wait.

Notes: The title to this week's chapter is a term beloved of pirates. It's also a nod to the season 1 episode "Flip of the Coin" where Neal uses the term to describe the X on the bottle of Bordeaux where Kate hid a clue. In canon, Neal didn't realize that the mystery swirling around Kate would eventually lead to a U-boat and a lost treasure in art. In our series, Kate also played a role in the art's recovery. I wrote about her this week for our blog. The post is called "Kate: No Longer in the Clouds."

I took dramatic license with the plundered paintings. Harlequin and Columbine was not looted by the Nazis nor was Madame Chocquet Reading by Renoir. The Raphael self-portrait, however, is one of many outstanding paintings still missing.

Mozzie's secret collection was augmented in Caffrey Disclosure when he helped himself to valuable manuscripts and autographed memorabilia. Has the Matisse joined it? The answer comes in a couple of weeks.

Just a couple of chapters left. Slated for next week is Chapter 18: Giraffe in a Green Tutu. No hints about what the title refers to!

Blog: Penna Nomen & Silbrith Conversation: www.pennasilbrithconversation.blogspot.com
Chapter Visuals and Music: The Harlequin's Shadow board on the Caffrey Conversation Pinterest website: www.pinterest.com/caffreycon
Thursday, September 15, 2005.

When Neal returned from France, he found himself once more shapeshifting between worlds. Sara's apartment was the safe haven, existing in a universe to itself. She didn't pressure him about what occurred in Europe. She understood there were aspects to the op which were off limits. Instead they focused on their private lives and ignored the rest.

But when he kissed her goodbye that Wednesday morning, he had to morph back into Neal Caffrey, grad student. Bianka was waiting for him at his first seminar. Conning her was a delicate dance of pretending to be infatuated without going too far. Neal was glad he'd secured Peter's approval to alert Richard and Aidan. The musketeers were called back to duty. Now that the university was in session, Richard was once more occupying the studio to Neal's left. When Neal arrived on Wednesday, he found Richard had scribbled "AFO" at the top of Neal's whiteboard, a reminder of their vow to be All for One just like last autumn. As if to reinforce the message, he popped into Neal's studio several times that evening to prevent any Hungarian fireworks from erupting.

Aidan's answer to the challenge was predictable. He gleefully volunteered to call a last-minute fencing practice whenever Neal needed a save. Their first competition was scheduled for the following Saturday, and Neal had missed out on the training sessions the previous weekend. Aidan had already requested he attend a practice session on Friday evening. A date with Bianka would have to wait till the following evening.

By Thursday Neal was fully recovered from jet lag and any lingering effects of the drug Adler had given him. He was sorely tempted to cancel the appointment with Christie. He wasn't running a fever. He felt fine. Perhaps that night with Sara was the cure he'd been seeking. She was constantly in the back of his mind, continuing to work her magic.

It was a quiet day at work since it was a travel day for the other team members, so Neal kept the appointment. When he described to Christie what he'd experienced, she was inclined to write it off as drug-related. He'd been so sure it was Astrena, but as the memory faded, so did the certainty. After submitting to more blood work, Neal was free to prepare for his evening.

He'd invited Sara to his favorite restaurant, La Palette, a bistro on the Upper East Side near the Met. The owner, Chef Jacques Legault, was a good friend.

When Neal and Sara decided to start dating, they formed a pact to gradually disclose some of their secrets to each other. La Palette made the ideal venue. It already held a secret for Peter. Contemporary art covered all the walls of the bistro. Jacques had painted a couple of them, but most were works by struggling artists. In exchange for borrowing their art, Jacques gave them a discount off their tabs. One of Neal's paintings was installed there permanently. At the time he'd donated it, publicity was the last thing he wanted. He'd left it unsigned and Jacques knew not to divulge his name. So far Peter hadn't guessed which painting was Neal's, and it had become a game for him to discover it on his own.

This was Sara's first time to visit the bistro. Neal introduced her to Jacques simply as Alicia. Would Henry be so devious as to question Jacques? Neal considered it a distinct possibility. Since Ydrus also could be monitoring his movements, they both wore their wigs. Neal had alerted Jacques about his disguised appearance in advance and made the reservation under the name of Matthew. Jacques was familiar with Neal's work for the FBI and hadn't questioned the need for subterfuge.
Neal had reserved one of the secluded alcoves for their use. The bottle of Chablis Grand Cru was already chilling at the table.

"To Matthew and Alicia," Sara said, clinking glasses with him. "Jacques appeared to enjoy the deception. Is he familiar with your work?"

He smiled acknowledgment. "Jacques owns the building. He rents out the apartments on the upper floors to artists, offering them a bargain rate. After the days with Adler, I sometimes crashed here. Once in a while literally."

"Then he knows about your former career path?" Sara asked, raising a brow.

"Yeah. He's friends with Mozzie, too." In his younger years, Jacques had been a counterfeiter and forger in Europe. He'd served time in France. When he was released, he opened a country restaurant in Burgundy. Some years later he met his future wife who was an American banker. When they married, he immigrated to New York and opened the bistro. His wife passed away several years ago.

When their entrées of coquilles St. Jacques had been served. Sara broached the topic du jour. "We agreed to start with recent history, and for me that's Bryan."

That was probably the most painful episode she could have picked. "Was he your Kate?" Neal asked.

She smiled ruefully. "I don't think so. It would have been easier to excuse if he had been. You were in love with Kate. Looking back, I don't think I ever was with Bryan. I was more smitten with what he represented."

"Bryan may be the best example of the rotten timing we seem to excel at. When you met him, I was still getting over Kate and not ready for another relationship."

"I sensed that as well, but it didn't stop me from being attracted to you. When Henry introduced us in that Manhattan hotel room, you had an air of mystery which made me want to learn more about you. And it wasn't just because you were suffering the aftereffects from being drugged," she quickly added.

He winced. "I regret we didn't meet under better circumstances. That wasn't my finest hour. Don't tell me you found my loopiness appealing?"

"You weren't loopy. You were in pain. I wished I could help." She paused to take a bite of scallop. "Later, as we got to know each other through our volunteer work at the runaway shelter, I was even more attracted. But that's when my own walls started coming up. Were you too good to be true? There was so little I knew about your past. Where had you acquired the skills that made Peter want to recruit you as a consultant? You knew so much about art and the world of white-collar crimes but you never referenced how you'd gained your experience. That aura of mystery became troubling."

Sara's honesty was a revelation. He'd no idea that was the way she felt, but it was understandable. "My past was a closed book to you."

"I shouldn't have held that against you. I didn't bring up my past either. But I worried how reliable you'd be. You didn't know how you were going to pay for grad school. You mentioned stealing a painting as an option. You were joking, of course, but there was a glint in your eyes which made me wonder if you were actually contemplating it."

"And it scared you?"
"Not the theft so much as not being able to pin down who you really were. You were like quicksilver. I knew you were a con artist. At the time I thought you were as good as Henry. Now I know you're better."

"May I quote you?"

"Sure. After juggling Bianka and the U-boat con, you're completely justified in wearing the crown. Anyway, with Bryan I felt on firmer ground." She stopped to smile ruefully. "I know how ridiculous that sounds, but I honestly believed he was the personification of the skilled insurance investigator I wanted to be. There were some early signals which should have alerted me to go slow, but I dismissed them. I was sure I was right and let my brain overrule my heart. You were an unknown. Bryan was steady and reliable." She hesitated for a moment and added quietly, "I've had experience with being abandoned."

Neal's heart went out to her as he reached over to clasp her hand. "Would you like to talk about it?"

She nodded and cleared her throat. "I think you'll understand better what I saw in Bryan. My dad walked out on my mom and me a few months after Emily ran away."

"How old were you?"

"Thirteen. Dad blamed Mom for not being alert to the signals that Emily was unhappy. She'd always been his favorite." Sara hesitated for a moment, her mouth tightening. "Once I overheard them fighting—I can still hear the arguments in my head. He lashed out at Mom for being an unfit mother. She defended herself, accusing him of doting on Emily while ignoring me."

Sara must have wondered how much she was to blame for her parents' problems. Neal could relate. He'd experienced similar thoughts about his mother.

"Finally, he just took off. It was like he was ashamed of us. Mom eventually filed for divorce and he didn't contest it. I heard he eventually remarried. He's never tried to contact me, and I haven't made any attempt either." She scanned his face, perhaps to assess his reaction. He hoped she read only sympathy.

"He was in advertising, and I gather quite good at his job. I suppose I should feel grateful. He didn't prolong the divorce and Mom didn't raise any issues. He paid for child support, and probably considered he'd done his best by us."

"So you saw in Bryan someone who wouldn't hurt you like he did," Neal prompted.

She nodded. "How wrong can a person be? I didn't go to grad school, but Bryan gave me a master's class in growing up."

Neal felt closer to Sara than ever before. He wasn't ready to discuss his childhood but he knew now that she'd understand. "I wish there were a way to make the memories less painful."

She shrugged. "They're part of who I am, but sharing them with you helps to dispel some of those lingering ghosts."

"Thanks for letting me know. Under the circumstances, it's natural that you would have been wary of me."

"It wasn't your past," Sara said, "it was not knowing what was in your past. I think if we're honest with each other, we can face anything." It was as if she realized his own struggles.
"We've both made bad choices in our mentors," Neal said, topping off their glasses with wine. "I'll save my early disasters for another time. Instead I'd like to explain how I turned the page. You mentioned you couldn't understand how I wound up being a consultant for the FBI, and it has to rank as one of the more unlikely fairy tales you'll ever hear."

Neal proceeded to tell her how his and Peter's paths had unexpectedly intersected in St. Louis. Playing a hunch, Neal had reached out to the agent and challenged him to make him a job offer. His gamble paid off when Peter took him up on it and convinced Hughes to give him a chance. When a musician needed their help, they'd stayed a few extra days in St. Louis and solved their first case together.

"The next day, Peter and I flew back to New York. I spent the day with a team of agents reviewing crimes I'd committed. After receiving immunity for the ones I'd owned up to, I signed the contract papers."

"Starting off a new job by admitting to your past misdeeds must not have been very pleasant."

"They didn't make it easy," Neal agreed. "The other agents were suspicious of my motives. In their eyes, I was a criminal. Persuading them I could be trusted would be a challenge."

"I know you don't now, but initially did you have any doubts you'd made the right decision?"

He didn't answer for a moment as he reflected on his first day at the Bureau. Neal had flown to St. Louis under an alias. He didn't have an opportunity to acquire legal papers before the return flight. He assumed Peter understood. That was a mistake. His future boss had taken advantage of Neal flying under an assumed name to have him arrested at the New York airport. Peter's intention was to provide evidence of an FBI arrest which could be useful for undercover work, but it was also to teach him a lesson.

The awkward situation was made worse when during the interrogation one of the agents sprained Neal's wrist. Peter later found out about it and was clearly angry the incident had occurred. At the end of the day, he told Neal to report to work in a week. Had he wondered if Neal would have second thoughts and run? He didn't seem to.

Back then, Peter didn't know him very well.


At the end of the grueling day, Peter had requested Jones escort Neal down to the lobby of the FBI Building. They stopped off at the interrogation room for Neal to collect his duffel bag. Agents would have had ample opportunity to search it while Neal met with Peter. He intended to check it for bugs in the taxi.

Jones didn't say much during the elevator ride but offered to carry his bag. Neal could have managed but appreciated the gesture. Neal had known he'd face resentment. He hadn't expected it to come that swiftly. Nothing like showing up under arrest for your first day at work—not that he'd technically been hired when Peter decided to pull a fast one. But Peter seemed blind to the optics.

Jones hung around till Neal was able to hail a taxi. The peak rush hour was over. It was after seven before Peter finally released him. A small silver lining—taxis were easier to come by.

"Keep the wrist iced and elevated," Jones cautioned when he slung Neal's bag into the taxi for him. "You want it X-rayed?"

"It's just a sprain." Neal knew the drill. He'd had similar injuries before. He supposed he should feel
lucky that it was his left wrist. He wasn't about to waste money on seeing a doctor. Resources were tight these days.

He still had a place to flop for a couple of nights. An artist friend of his had a studio above La Palette. Eduardo let Neal crash at his place when he was gone, but he was due back on Wednesday.

During the taxi ride to the Upper East Side, Neal had a long time to mull over what had gone wrong. Neal had gone out of his way to upgrade Peter's ticket to first class for the flight to New York while he rode in the cattle car. And what thanks did he get? Placed in handcuffs at the airport? The sting of that would take a while to get over.

But far worse was the reality check it forced him to confront. This was a man Neal thought he could trust, a man who truly deserved to be a father figure. Peter was fair. His ethics were above reproach. That's what Neal had believed for months. And in St. Louis, Peter had fully lived up to his expectations. He'd offered Neal a chance to turn his life around and go legit. Had Neal's instincts been wrong? Was he on the cusp of making yet another mistake?

He'd gone through a string of ill-advised mentors. Placing his trust in Henry's father had been a near catastrophic failure. Keller was no better. Neal had stuck with Klaus the longest, but he turned out to have a darker side too. When he returned to New York, Neal thought Adler would make an excellent teacher. Wrong.

After being swindled by Adler, Neal vowed never to be hoodwinked again. Mozzie claimed it was his own fault for searching for a father figure. But with Peter, Neal was convinced he was finally on the right track.

Today had been a glimpse of what that future life would be like. Neal would work among agents who viewed him with open hostility. Was the airport stunt a portent of worse to come? Was this his chance to cut his losses and run?

When Neal arrived at La Palette, the bistro was bustling with the evening crowd even though Monday was usually a slow night. He paused at the entrance, his stomach growling at the delicious aromas. He hadn't eaten anything since breakfast early that morning in St. Louis. The granola bar Jones gave him a couple of hours ago didn't count. Peter didn't appear to think it was necessary to give meals to innocent victims who'd been unjustifiably arrested. Even convicts in prison had rights.

Neal continued to grump as he headed up the side stairs to the studio. His wrist was throbbing. Some start to his new life. His old one was looking better by the moment. He dumped his bag in the room which served as combination living room and bedroom and checked the refrigerator. Nothing to eat. That figured. He'd expected to be gone a week and had cleaned it out in case Eduardo returned early. No ice in the small freezer compartment either. Neal groaned and sprawled on the couch.

After spending several more minutes wallowing in a rehash of the wreckage for the day, he felt somewhat better. Looking on the bright side, he wasn't under arrest. The Bureau had given him immunity. He had a job—if he wanted it—next week.

He glanced at his watch. Nine o'clock. It was late enough, the kitchen was winding down. He could prevail on Jacques for some food. Mozzie had texted he was coming by. Neal replied he'd be in the kitchen.

The special that night had been boeuf Bourguignon. When Neal went downstairs, there were only a few patrons left, lingering over coffee and dessert. The kitchen staff had already started the final cleanup.
Jacques took one look at Neal and asked, "Rough day, mon ami?"

Neal didn't attempt to disguise it. "My introduction to a new life didn't go as planned."

"Have you eaten?"

Neal shook his head.

"That, at least, is easily remedied." Jacques directed him to sit at the salad worktable which had already been cleared. While Neal pulled up a stool, Jacques ladled out a big plate of stew and set out a basket of French bread along with an opened bottle of the house Burgundy. "I'll return after seeing to the front," he promised.

Neal put his brain on off mode and listened to the gossip. He knew everyone in the kitchen. He'd often volunteered his services when they were understaffed. It was good to be back with friends.

Within a few minutes, Jacques returned and sat down next to him. He refilled Neal's glass and poured one for himself. "Now tell me about this new job."

Neal explained how he'd met Peter in St. Louis and the offer he'd made.

"So you're going straight? Félicitations!"

Neal didn't say anything. Jacques should have asked for his opinion yesterday. He reached for the bread basket with his left hand and winced. The Bureau's welcome gift was mocking him.

Jacques frowned at the discoloration. "And that? How did it happen?"

"The FBI's interrogation technique has room for improvement."

"Did you see anyone about it?"

"No need."

"Let me take a look."

Neal reluctantly held out his arm for Jacques to examine.

With practiced ease, Jacques shoved back the sleeve and began kneading Neal's wrist as if it were pastry.

"Ow! So that's what bread dough feels like."

Jacques gave a small smile. "This is my foolproof method of checking for breaks, and you don't have one. My prescription is more wine and food . . . after I wrap it and apply ice. I keep emergency medical supplies in my office for cooking mishaps."

His wrist on ice, his stomach full, Neal felt those dark clouds looming overhead begin to dissipate. Jacques insisted on scrounging two slices of apple tartine for them. He brought over the cheese board while asking for the full account of what occurred at the Bureau.

"You may not feel like a celebration now but your new job is worthy of one."

Was it? Neal was no longer convinced.

"What did the suits do to you?" Neal turned to see Mozzie had entered the kitchen and was staring at
his wrist with dismay. "They didn't waste any time to show their true colors. I smell a lawsuit. Your wrist could be broken. They've deprived you of your livelihood—"

"Calm down, Mozz. It's not that bad."

Jacques frowned disapprovingly. "Don't agitate the soufflé. Have some wine."

An unnecessary offer. Mozzie was already helping himself. Neal was forced to review the events of the day yet again.

"Your choice in mentor has turned out to be a Jekyll and Hyde," Mozzie commented. "I warned you that suits cannot be trusted. First playing the good cop in St. Louis then the bad cop as soon as you return to New York? A classic maneuver. Are you sure you want to take a chance on him?"

Before Neal could reply, Jacques spoke up. "You shouldn't be so fast to condemn. This man, Peter, he allowed you to present your case in St. Louis. Many would have simply arrested you on the spot. And he didn't simply hear you out, he listened to you. I give him high marks for that. Peter is going out on a limb too. He may have felt pressure from his bosses to douse you with the cold water. If you run after he went to the effort of securing your immunity, it's not only your career which will suffer. He could face unpleasant repercussions as well." He glanced over at the kitchen staff. They were talking as they washed pots and not paying attention to them.

Jacques slid his stool closer to the table and lowered his voice. "You made the decision to enter a new world. No one forced you. I have some experience with new worlds too. Not just my life here, but prison. They all have their codes of conduct. Was it pleasant what you experienced? Of course not. But neither was prison. What I endured was far more painful. You have the opportunity to keep prison out of your future. Don't make a snap decision that you'll regret."

Jacques had a point. Neal criticized Peter for not understanding the optics. Was he also guilty? Flying to New York under an alias? Pulling a fast one so Peter could fly first class? Was Peter so strait-laced, he couldn't bend the rules? Perhaps he was also having second thoughts and regretted what he'd agreed to.

Jacques believed if Neal took off, he might harm Peter's career. Was Peter already concerned that Neal would damage his reputation?

Mozzie eyed the cheese longingly and picked up a slice of French bread instead. "I've never served time. Neal won't have to either. Still, I grant you there are undeniable advantages to working with suits . . . if you can stomach your distaste. You'll be able to study their methods. You'll understand how their Gestapo brains work. That can pay rich dividends in the future." He pushed his glasses up his nose. "Think of it as a long con. One that you're free to stop at any time."

Jacques made an expressive Gallic shrug. "Mozzie's attitude may help to ease the transition. But from what you told me, they're not all thugs and cheats. One of the agents informed Peter what had happened. Do you think Peter lied when he said he hadn't ordered the injury?"

Neal shook his head. "No, I'm sure his anger was genuine."

Mozzie scowled as he glanced at Neal's wrist. "Burke may not have instigated it but he knows how to take advantage of it. You need to be careful around him. You opened yourself up to being exploited when you flew under an alias, and he seized it."

Mozzie was right. Peter had called an audible. Neal had gotten too relaxed around him. It wouldn't happen again. If he decided to work there, he'd have to be on his guard.
"You have a week before you'll have to give the suit a decision," Mozzie said. "That leaves plenty of time for a job. I'm leaving for Montreal tomorrow. The crew would benefit from someone of your expertise, and the payout is attractive. Are you interested?"

Good question. Neal didn't have much in reserve. He'd have to find a place to live. Did he even have the funds for a security deposit? What was he going to do for a week? Go to Atlantic City? There weren't any poker tournaments scheduled. Hustle pool? His wrist injury would throw him off his game.

Neal hadn't decided what to do by the time he headed upstairs with a bucket of ice provided by Jacques. This was the first time Jacques had talked about life in prison, but Neal knew he'd served five long years. Neal had never worried about doing time. Keller had never been arrested. The authorities didn't even know who the Leopard was. Neal wouldn't be caught either. But if he ran, he'd be back on the Bureau's radar and have to flee overseas. No second chances Hughes had said. This was his make-or-break moment.

Henry had texted him in the afternoon. He knew about Neal's plans for the day and wanted to know what happened. He'd have to wait a while.

What could Neal possibly tell him? That he'd blown it? That Peter had blown it? That he misjudged Peter? Neal had been sick with a fever when he'd made a snap decision to reach out to the agent. Were his instincts right?

Neal didn't get much sleep that night. When the wheels in his head finally stopped turning, it was early morning and he still hadn't decided whether to take Mozzie up on his offer.

Neal headed to a bakery on Third Avenue for breakfast, hoping the fresh air would clear his head. It was so easy to slip back into thief mode. What had happened in St. Louis seemed more surreal by the moment. He had the signed contract from the FBI as proof, but was it worth taking the risk?

He wished he could see Kate, but she still wasn't answering his messages. He could spend the week going around to art galleries. It would be useful leg work for future jobs, but it wouldn't help pay the bills. Had Peter ordered his agents to tail him? Neal knew he hadn't been followed yesterday evening. He had several aliases he hadn't confessed to . . .

His phone buzzed as he was waiting in line at the bakery.

"What did you decide?" Mozzie asked.

"No to Montreal. I haven't decided about the other."

Mozzie didn't appear surprised. "I had breakfast with Billy Feng at the Aloha Emporium. He mentioned he has a cousin who's opening up a restaurant, the Hunan Pavilion. It's on Amsterdam Avenue close to Columbia University. The cousin wants a mural painted. Billy wondered if you'd be interested. The pay won't compare to Montreal, of course."

Neal liked Billy and his daughter Maggie. Mozzie had introduced them several months ago when Neal moved to New York. Billy was a cat burglar who'd retired at the top of his game. He'd used the funds he'd acquired to buy a brownstone in Morningside Heights near Columbia and opened a Hawaiian-themed shop on the ground floor.

Neal agreed to talk with him later that morning. As long as he didn't put weight on his wrist, it shouldn't be a factor. Neal hadn't had a chance to paint much for months. He'd thought about visiting museums during his week off, but this was even better.
When he arrived at the Emporium, Billy was busy with a customer. Neal wove his way through the racks of Hawaiian shirts and sarongs to Maggie's florist alcove. Her counter was covered with tropical flower arrangements.

"Just the person I wanted to see!" she exclaimed when she spotted him. "I'm swamped with orders. Can you help?"

Neal had assisted Maggie before. He liked the Asian-style arrangements she made, and she praised him for his artistic eye. An added plus was the Kona coffee she kept him supplied with as he worked. He plunked down on a stool next to her. Maggie was rushing to complete a batch of orders for the local hospital, New York-Presbyterian. She also had an appointment with their PR person about arrangements for a donors' banquet.

Billy stopped by after finishing with the customer. He'd spoken with his cousin, the restaurant owner, and he wouldn't be available till the afternoon.

"That's excellent news for me," Maggie declared. "You can help with deliveries at the hospital. We'll have carts for the flowers. Your wrist won't be an issue."

"You'll be doing us a favor," Billy added, his broad face crinkling into a smile.

It was actually the opposite, but it was nice of him to phrase it that way. Billy pulled over an extra chair and joined them in the alcove, adding labels to the completed arrangements.

"Mozzie explained you're considering a career change," he said, twisting a tag into place.

Neal nodded. "How did you decide the time was right to leave?"

"For me, it was an easy decision. My wife had died. Maggie was in high school. I wanted to give her a more stable life."

Billy had been in his early forties when he turned legit. He'd made a fortune. He could afford to walk away. Was Neal rushing things? It would make much more sense to wait till he'd built up his bank account. Neal had sunk everything he had into Adler's fund, not realizing it was a Ponzi scheme. Billy echoed Jacques's advice to not make a rash decision. But wasn't that what Neal had done in St. Louis?

Neal and Maggie left for the hospital midday. Many of the flowers were for patients in the cancer center. She had to race for her appointment while Neal delivered the flowers. He didn't mind. Many of the patients were kids. Neal stopped to chat with them. He could perform a few card tricks with his right hand.

On his way to check on Maggie, he spotted a storage door ajar. It reminded him of the Hospital Game he liked to play. Was someone else playing hide-and-seek? After scanning the hallway to verify no one was close by, he slipped silently inside. He was just in time to catch a brief glimpse of a little face and a small leg retreating behind a storage cabinet. She was wearing a Christmas bow on her shaved head.

Neal suspected someone was looking for her. He decided to invent a new game.

Ignoring the mini-fugitive, he began to sing "The Twelve Days of Christmas" in a low voice as he scanned the shelves. "On the first day of Christmas my true love gave to me a giraffe in a green tutu." He disregarded the sniggers coming from behind the cabinet and continued to sing about two polka-dot tigers.
"Tigers don't have polka dots!" The little girl in printed hospital pajamas jumped out from behind the cabinet. She couldn't be more than seven years old. Pointing proudly to the tigers on her top, she said, "See. They have stripes."

"Are you sure? They look like polka dots to me."

"You need glasses. And sheet music too. There aren't any giraffes in the song."

"There are in mine. Don't you like giraffes? They make me want to dance." He began to shuffle his feet in a silly dance.

With a giggle she joined in. They danced their way out of the closet and next to a bench in the hallway where the hospital staff could see her.

By the time they'd finished the song with due allowance for dancing ducks, frolicking frogs, giggling gophers, and silly skunks they'd become best friends. The girl's name was Amy and she was a patient in the leukemia ward.

"Were you hiding?" Neal asked.

She nodded shyly.

"I've hidden out a lot in hospitals, too," he confided. "I bet you had a good reason."

"I heard the doctor talking with Mommy. They want to begin a new procedure. It's gonna make me sick."

No wonder she wanted to hide. Not the recommended way to spend the holidays.

"Good thing you won't go through it alone. You have those tigers to help."

"They're not real!"

"They look pretty lively to me."

She frowned, plainly not persuaded.

Neal tried again. "Did you know you can hide in plain sight?"

Her eyes grew wide. "You can? How?"

"First you need to take whatever scares you and mash it into a big wad of nothing." He used his hands to form a big clump of air and was pleased to see her imitate him. "Then you toss it away." He flung out his arm and so did she.

He swiped his hands back and forth, and she copied him. "Now that we've gotten rid of it, we want to make sure it can't sneak back in. That's where we call on our secret friends."

Her face fell. "I don't think I have one," she said in a small voice.

"Everyone does. It could be a rabbit or a cat—"

"Or a hamster? We have a couple of hamsters at home. What's yours?"

On the spur of the moment, Neal thought of a stuffed animal he'd loved as a child. "A puppy. In order to make it your secret friend, you have to think about it really hard"—he screwed up his face,
and she copied him—"then you stuff it inside you." They both thumped their chests. "Now this is the key part. Whenever you want your secret friend to come out, all you have to do is wiggle your index finger. Your secret friend will pop out and be there with you. You can hide behind them whenever you feel scared, but no one else can see them. Everyone will think you're very brave."

A nurse ran up to them shortly afterward.

"Amy, we've been looking for you everywhere! The music is about to start." She turned to Neal. "Are you one of the carolers?"

Amy nodded before he could reply. "His songs are funny!" She grabbed his hand and tugged at him to follow her down the hall.

The nurse walked with them and whispered. "You're a miracle worker. We haven't been able to get her to smile for days."

Neal stopped to drop a note off for Maggie explaining where he was and joined a group of singers and patients in a lounge for families. It was equipped with a piano, a TV, and an array of games. Neal played some of the songs on the piano with his right hand. The kids liked the fact that his wrist was wrapped, and he let them color on it. There were several budding artists among the group.

By the time Maggie arrived, he'd already promised to come back.

That hospital trip turned out to be a positive omen. In the afternoon he and Billy went to see Billy's cousin, Jianyun Feng. The new restaurant owner was determined to make his restaurant a luxurious recreation of a Chinese garden pavilion and Neal was happy to do his part. There was a long wall which cried out to be painted. Neal suggested two dragons. One would carry a flaming pearl in its claw and the other would chase it.

"Those dragons you painted . . . you weren't thinking of the first one being a cunning jewel thief and the other the FBI agent hot on his tail, literally?" Sara asked.

"That's one interpretation," Neal said airily. "The Chinese associate them with good luck. Mine were ducking in and out of clouds. It was an elusive game of catch-me-if-you-can. The owner was in a hurry to complete the project. The grand opening was scheduled to take place a week later. I knew I'd have to work my butt off to get it done in time. Billy offered to let me stay in a guest room over the Emporium and I spent the next several days painting. I didn't have time to regret the Montreal job."

"I've never eaten at the Hunan Pavilion," she said. "We need to go there next time. And that will be my treat. Is there any reason why you chose to sing about giraffes?"

He shrugged. "I like giraffes. Amy's big eyes reminded me of them. I'd seen the tigers on her pajamas and figured it would take a couple of verses before she'd come out."

Sara smiled. "I like giraffes too. That's something else we have in common. They were my sister's favorite animal. And the green tutu?"

He rolled his eyes at her. "I could hardly stick a giraffe in a pear tree."

"What was I thinking!"

"I asked Maggie to rewrap my wrist daily so the kids would have a fresh canvas. Amy always drew
giraffes. Each time the tutu was a different color—red, blue, purple. She loved purple." Neal stopped and took a sip of wine to swallow the lump that was forming. Purple was the last color she'd used. She went home the next day. "I tried not to think about the Bureau. I painted, visited the hospital during the lunch hour. Evenings I ran in Riverside Park." He stopped for a moment as he thought back. "I used to pass a magnificent mansion made of ornately carved white marble with a copper and green tile roof. I fantasized what it would be like to live there. I never thought I'd be able to."

"June's place?"

He nodded. "That was before I knew who she was." He took a breath. "With each day that passed, working at the Bureau seemed more remote, a daydream just like that mansion." He winced ruefully. "You should know I also thought about potential heists. If it didn't work out with the Bureau, I'd continue on the same path I'd been on."

She didn't challenge him with other options, but simply asked, "Did you wish you'd gone on the job with Mozzie?"

He shook his head. "No. I eventually spoke with Henry but didn't go into the details of what had happened at the Bureau. Mainly I thought about what it would be like to work for Peter and if I'd misjudged him."

"We were both searching for someone to hitch our star to, a role model. I was blind to Bryan's faults and refused to listen to the doubts that crept in even at the beginning. Your instincts about Peter were right."

He shrugged. "I wish I'd recognized that. I understood that if I bailed on him, I wouldn't get another chance, but my old life still called to me. Was a decidedly unknown future worth the sacrifice? And if I didn't totally commit, would it be a worse disaster than if I didn't make the attempt?"

"You were about to radically change your life. Stepping back to reassess is a reasonable move. What convinced you to give the Bureau a chance?"

"Not a what but a who—Peter." Neal raised his hand to gesture to the waiter. "You'll need dessert for the details."

Notes: The flashback in this chapter has a special significance for me. Daydreaming about what Neal did during the week before he reported for work at the FBI is what got me started writing White Collar fanfics. I was especially happy to include references to Neal and Peter's initial meeting in Caffrey Conversation, their first case in Choirboy Caffrey, the Hospital Game (which first appeared in By the Book), and of course, Henry, who has become one of the most beloved members of Caffrey Conversation. So much fanfic goodness from the gifted Penna Nomen! She inspired me to write fanfics and she's probably sparked many daydreams for you as well.

I wrote about the flashback scene for the blog. The post is called "Launch Point." Neal will finish the tale next week in the final chapter of Harlequin's Shadow. Still a few disclosures to be revealed. We'll also eavesdrop on Klaus and Rolf who may let slip a couple of hints about what's to come.

Blog: Penna Nomen & Silbrith Conversation: www.pennasilbrithconversation.blogspot.com
Chapter Visuals and Music: The Harlequin's Shadow board on the Caffrey Conversation Pinterest website: www.pinterest.com/caffreycon
A Sword Is Like a Bird


Neal had spent the past half hour describing to Sara what took place during the week before he reported for work at the FBI. He hadn't disclosed everything. Some secrets were not his to share. Billy and Jacques's former criminal lives were off the table.

"You said Amy returned home that Friday," Sara commented while the waiter placed the chocolate soufflés they'd ordered for dessert in front of them. "Did you ever see her again?"

Neal shook his head. "I continued to volunteer at the hospital on weekends. One of the nurses on the cancer floor told me Amy died about a month after she returned home."

"I'm sorry." Sara's eyes grew bright as she reached over to clasp his hand. "That must have been devastating to hear."

He nodded, grateful for her understanding. "The week before I was due to start at the Bureau I spent working on the mural. Evenings I'd run in Riverside Park. I didn't hear anything from Mozzie. In retrospect, I think he was leaving me alone to let me think things through."

"I bet you're right. I'd wondered if he had anything to do with Billy suggesting the job."

Neal smiled. "That's my suspicion. Mozzie knows that when I'm thrown into a tailspin, painting often restores my equilibrium. But this time it didn't have that effect."

"In St. Louis, you were sick, on meds . . . You could have thought you weren't in any shape to properly assess Peter or his offer."

He chuckled. "Never make a decision when you're impaired? Had it come back to bite me now? I'd enjoyed the case we worked on together, but that wasn't a real FBI case. The taste I had of what it would be like in the Bureau was sticking in my throat. The agents mistrusted me. Peter, the man I assumed I'd be working with, turned out to be some remote fed who I didn't know. He'd conned me at the airport, arrested me. He made a good case that he didn't know anything about the injury, but I'd been fooled before. Klaus told me he hadn't killed a guard at the Museum. He'd lied to me. Was Peter another Klaus?"

Sara set down her fork. "I can understand why you felt that way, but I also sympathize with Peter. He might have been experiencing similar doubts. What had he agreed to? Last summer, I worried if what I saw in you was genuine or just an act, and at the time we'd been volunteering at the same shelter for months. Peter had known you for only about a week."

He shrugged acknowledgment. "I couldn't figure myself out either. I'd never worked in a nine-to-five job. Did I want to take orders, work on assignments which didn't interest me? And I hadn't even experienced the thrill of the file vault yet. How would I react to the loss of my freedom? Those all loomed as potential landmines."

WCWCWCWCWCWC

Neal had settled into a good routine at the Emporium. He'd have an early breakfast with Maggie and Billy before heading off to paint. Billy knew about the contract with the Bureau but didn't bring it up. Instead most of the conversations revolved around his beloved orchids. He seemed to especially enjoy describing the horrors of transplant shock in excruciating detail. Neal wasn't blind to the
obvious analogy. Billy believed transplanting was necessary for the growth process, but Neal wasn't convinced he'd found the proper pot for himself.

He'd created a circuit to run at Riverside Park. His trail took him close to the Hudson River and up to Riverside Church. During the front loop he sometimes paused to admire the white mansion on the corner of 107th Street. With the salary he'd make, he'd be lucky to afford a studio in the Bowery where Mozzie had a safe house. Normally, Mozzie didn't let him stay long in any of his safe houses. He might make an exception for the Bowery if Neal offered to take care of his pet rat Percy.

Living in the Bowery, working at an office where he was considered the enemy . . . was that the life he wanted to lead? By Friday he still hadn't decided. Mozzie was returning Saturday night. Neal knew he couldn't delay much longer.

Friday morning he was at work on his dragons when Peter called his cell phone.

"Checking up on me?" Neal asked half-jokingly.

"Should I be?"

Neal enjoyed the mocking tone in Peter's reply. He was a little surprised at how good it felt to hear the agent's voice. Was this what he'd been waiting for? A chance to talk with him before making a decision?

"Did I catch you at a bad time?" Peter asked.

Neal longed to tease him that he was in the midst of a jewel heist and to call back later, but Peter would probably believe him. He clamped down on his tongue and restricted himself to "You can call off your agents. Nothing illegal."

Peter was quiet for a moment. Neal knew his words had stung. "There aren't any agents tracking you, but I can understand why you said that. After the events of Monday, we need to clear the air. You mind a visitor?"

Neal gave him the directions to the restaurant and explained what he was doing. He was glad it was an activity he felt proud of. And what kind of signal was it that it mattered how Peter would view it?

The restaurant was still a construction site. Neal's area was finished but carpenters were installing carved wood lattice dividers in the back. He tuned out the noise of hammers around him to focus on his dragons. The blue one was in the lead, the prized jewel in its claw. In hot pursuit was the larger red dragon. Its jaw was gaped open in anticipation of snatching away the pearl.

"Very impressive."

When he heard Peter's voice behind him, Neal took a second to plaster an easy smile on his face before turning around. He noted Peter's quick glance at his palette which was lying on top of a stool. Normally he would have been holding it in his left hand.

"How's the wrist?"

"Better, thanks. I'd remove the wrap but I like the design."

Peter seized on the low-hanging fruit Neal provided him. His face expressed a wariness that Neal was concealing in his own expression. Neal held out his wrist for him to admire the drawing. Amy had given the giraffe a purple ensemble for the day.
"Did you draw that?"

"During my primitive period? No, this was a gift from a special friend."

Peter approached closer to inspect the design. "Am I supposed to know what it is?"

Neal shrugged. "It's pretty clear to me it's a giraffe in a purple tutu."

"I sense a story behind that." Peter tilted his head and looked at him hopefully.

Neal smiled but he wasn't inclined to share. He could feel his walls snapping up. Which fed was standing in front of him—the man he thought he knew or someone else?

Peter didn't press but stepped back to view Neal's painting. When Neal explained the work to him, Peter drew the natural conclusion. "I bet you're the blue dragon who's stolen the pearl. Is that me chasing you?"

"Your assumptions are incorrect. Leaping to conclusions can be dangerous." Okay, just a little bitterness could be excused.

Peter took a breath. "Look, it's too noisy to talk in here. Can you take a break for a few minutes?"

Neal glanced at his palette. He was using oils. The pigments would easily last. And he wanted that conversation. "There's a coffee shop on the corner which makes a decent brew."

A few minutes later they were seated in the shop with steaming cups of Sumatra roast. Neal was in the mood for something dark. He let Peter take the lead.

"I recognize Monday was a little harsh."

"Ya think? Arresting me at the airport? Giving me the thrill of meeting my new co-workers while manacled? You denied me lunch. Even in prison, inmates have meals, or so I'm told. I have no personal knowledge."

Peter winced. "You're angry. I get it. But you pushed a couple of my buttons at the airport in St. Louis. Taking advantage of the system to bump me to first class? Traveling under a false identity?"

Neal flared up despite his initial decision to play it cool. "You put me in that position." He stopped and took a breath, adding in a lower voice. "I get it. You took advantage of the opportunity to make me face reality. You view me as a criminal, and you wanted to drill that into your team as well."

"That wasn't my intention, and you know it." His voice was a low growl, a warning Neal breezed through. This would be a test. Peter had challenged him on Monday. It was time to reciprocate.

"How would I know? I thought you were the man who preached team work. Is that the way you treat a team member? And before you say I wasn't on board yet, let me remind you of your words when you came to see me after the arrest. You told me that I didn't belong in the FBI after what I pulled. Did you mean it?"

Peter's jaw hardened but he took a swig of coffee before replying, forcing Neal to take a breath as well. "I was making a point, but the words didn't come out right. I already knew trust would be a big issue for both of us, and my actions made the situation worse. I'm sorry."

That was unexpected. When had anyone ever apologized to him? Off hand, he couldn't remember a single occurrence.
"I intend to address it with the team on Monday, but you deserve a personal explanation. You're right. That was a lousy way for the team to meet you. But what I regret most is that you're more likely to view us as the enemy. All I can say is that I'll work to repair the damage. I'm a firm believer in team members being fully apprised of what they're walking into. I violated that rule with you."

Neal appreciated that Peter didn't downplay the recurrence of future tensions. They were inevitable. Would he be able to change the opinion of hostile agents? He prided himself on his con skills. This would be an excellent test. Shouldn't he thank Peter instead of giving him grief?

Peter leaned forward, deliberately getting in his face. "I'm sure this wasn't the last time I'll make you angry, and you'll no doubt pull more stunts that will have me boiling over. Don't let last Monday make you regret your decision."

Did he realize that was precisely what Neal had been debating? Had his wife talked to him about it? Neal had been impressed by how well Elizabeth had read him on the phone. He'd learned from this experience that Peter was more volatile than he'd expected, but he was also open to admitting he'd made mistakes. Klaus never had. Keller never had.

"You have the potential to turn your life around. There's a lot of injustice in the world. People who are hurting and could benefit from the skills you bring to the table. That musician you helped in St. Louis was just the beginning. There are families and individuals whose lives could be made better." He nodded to Neal's wrist. "Maybe whoever drew that giraffe will need your help someday."

What Amy was facing was ten thousand times worse than whatever crap he'd have to deal with at the Bureau. The only diplomas Neal had were ones he'd forged. That hadn't been an issue with the FBI. Where else would that be the case?

Peter sipped his coffee for a moment, giving him time to think it over, before giving another nudge. "You're coming in at eight on Monday morning, right?"

"I told you I'd be there, and I will." He could reevaluate after a month.

Peter nodded, a slow smile forming. "Good. We're giving each other a chance. That's a start."

"You still owe me lunch," Neal reminded him.

Peter relaxed into a snort. "What's this hang-up you have with meals? How about this? Meet me at Foley's Tavern this evening after work. It's just south of the Federal Building and the local waterhole for the Bureau. I bet Jones is free and some of the other team members will likely be there too. Foley's makes decent sandwiches and they probably have some wine you'll find drinkable."

"Most of the team joined us that evening at Foley's," Neal said, scraping the last of the chocolate soufflé off his plate. "I met Travis, got to know Jones a little better."

"When you reached the end of the month, did it take you long to make a decision?"

"I didn't even think about it," Neal admitted. "Henry was in town and had orchestrated a birthday celebration for Peter where we wound up going on a treasure hunt to recover stolen items. I really shouldn't give Henry a hard time for his schemes. They're all with the best intentions. Thanks to him, Peter and I didn't butt heads nearly as much during those first few months as we would have otherwise. And how can I give him grief for believing you and I were right for each other?"

"Someday we'll need to properly express our appreciation," she agreed, smiling as well.
"Looking back, I wish I had discussed the events with Henry. He would have pounded some sense into me. Instead, by keeping everything bottled up inside, I let a minor incident fester into something which nearly destroyed my future." He looked at her. "You said we need to be honest with each other. The corollary to that is being open with each other. I'd like to think I'm getting better at that."

"You are," she declared. "Would the old Neal have told me about Astrena? Confided your doubts about joining the FBI? And everything I've heard reinforces my belief that we're on the right track."

"I feel the same way." The tale of his inner struggle must have been unsettling, but Sara had offered only support and understanding. By sharing their experiences they'd been able to reach a new level of intimacy. It was a moment to savor. "I walked away from the meeting with Peter, confident I'd made the right decision. During my first week at work, I met June and Byron while caroling at the hospital, and June offered to rent me the loft. I used to play the piano and sing for Byron during those last months of his life. He was a former felon. He helped ease the transition."

"And those dragons? You told Peter they didn't represent you and him. Who are they?"

"The blue one is me, all right. The red dragon I viewed as all the obstacles which stood in my way. Lot of ferocity in that dragon. Not just the bad guys. My inner demons can be worse than any external ones. Doubt. Indecision. They almost drowned out my instincts." He took her hand. "What happened that week was a game changer. Peter could have wiped his hands of a cocky smartass but he saw something in me which I didn't realize myself."

His demons were circling around Sara too. Fear he'd hurt her. Voices insisting she was too good for him. Peter had challenged him to decide what kind of man he wanted to be. Sara knew who he was and wasn't shying away.

Mozzie once told him that fairy tale endings weren't meant for con men like them. Were he and Sara about to prove Mozzie wrong?

**Burke Townhouse. Friday morning.**

El was working at home when Henry called. She was glad she'd already made her tea. This could take a while.

As expected, Henry wanted to know what had been discussed earlier in the week at the latest Arkham Round Table session. Getting him to open up about his kidnapping ordeal was a non-starter. El didn't press too hard. She knew Noelle would be much more effective. Matchmaking wasn't the only secret conspiracy El was party to. She and Noelle had forged a wrought-iron grapevine to keep each other informed about the two lone wolves in their lives.

"I relayed your suggestion about Chad," El said, slipping off her flats. "Including the villain who had kidnapped Sara is a natural addition to the Arkham Files plot. Diana had already sketched out a role for him. You'll like this—she arrived at the meeting with a fresh batch of notes from Neal and Sara."

He chuckled. "Confirming what we thought—they're using the stories to achieve what they can't have in their real lives. What did they suggest?"

"Neal thought it was time for Arkham Neal to take the initiative with Sara. Meanwhile our Sara suggests the addition of the Other Woman. That raises possibilities of jealousy, misunderstandings—"

"Quarrels leading to revelations?"

"It would be a natural sequence."
"It's an interesting wrinkle." He fell silent for a moment. "Neal told me about what happened in the truck—his Van Gogh episode."

"I heard about it as well. We discussed it at the Round Table."

"I know Neal. The likelihood of him becoming involved with someone when he has the curse hanging over his head is nil."

"Yet clearly he enjoys the romantic sparks in the stories even he complains about them. Would you like to meet to review our plans?"

"That will have to wait. Win-Win heard from Japan that they're interested in our facial recognition software package. They want me to give the sales pitch in Tokyo and schedule additional stops in Singapore and China."

"When will you leave?"

"Sunday."

"But you just returned!"

"Hey, this wasn't my preference either. The software team is demanding equal time, and with good reason. It's been a while since I focused on the project. I shouldn't be gone longer than ten to fourteen days. How much trouble can Neal get into in that short amount of time?"

"Do you really want me to answer that?"

**Castle in the Matra Mountains north of Budapest. Friday afternoon.**

Klaus mounted the oak staircase to his brother's quarters on the third floor of the castle. Anya had given him the second best suite in the building with magnificent views of the surrounding forest and mountains.

The castle had been built in the nineteenth century by a prince who admired King Ludwig's castles in Bavaria. Rolf's study was typical—a pastiche of Gothic and contemporary. The oak paneling, oriental rugs, and Tudor-style furniture shared the space with an array of computers worthy of a university think tank.

Jacek Kolar often worked with Rolf in his office rather than the computer lab on the fourth floor, but Jacek had been absent for three weeks. After his recent plastic surgery, Anya had granted him permission to recover in Italy. It was for the best. Marta was staying in Rolf's bedroom, enjoying her return to freedom. Although she and Jacek were married in name only, there could be lingering resentment on Jacek's part. His focus needed to remain on the upcoming assignment in New York.

Klaus found Rolf sitting at his desk. Vermeer's painting of *The Astronomer* hung on the wall to his right. Displayed underneath it was Rolf's collection of Renaissance astronomical devices. Klaus thought of it as a shrine to Azathoth.

Rolf waved him to the side chair beside his desk. "You saw the news, I assume?"

Klaus nodded. The reports of the spectacular art discovery in France had been carried on both the internet and dark net. "Our agents have been unable to learn how they discovered the location of the cave. The authorities have only released a few details. They described the site as a previously unreported cave near Osselle."
"The list of recovered paintings is intriguing, is it not?"

Klaus smiled. "The Braque? Did the lion cub sneak it in?"

"My bet is that Peter did. It was well played. The painting Adler bought must have been a forgery
Neal had painted to trap him. Nowhere in any of the reports are fractals mentioned. Was Huber's
sheet of equations meaningless?"

Klaus shrugged. "I suppose it's possible there could have been a homing beacon associated with the
cave. Perhaps there was a hidden message in the painting. When Neal and I stole it, we didn't test it
for invisible inks. Once the cub is working for us, we'll be able to find out how they managed it."

Rolf nodded absently and swiveled to study the Vermeer painting. "Did Peter pull the same stunt
with The Astronomer?"

"What do you mean?"

Rolf turned to face him. "Was the painting you stole in Paris the original or a forgery?"

"That's insane," Klaus said without thinking.

"No it's not. Peter's known about my interest in Renaissance astronomy for almost a year. The
armillary sphere in the Arkham Files stories is a reference to the spheres I'd used in that house in
New Jersey. They were the key to unlock a trap I'd set for him and Neal. What if Peter decided to
challenge me with my own methods? I'd had a Galileo manuscript forged."

"So his answer was to have Neal make a forgery of The Astronomer?"

"Exactly. You'd hired Neal to forge Vermeer's The Woman in Blue. This painting would make an
ideal counterattack."

Could Rolf be right? The Louvre had placed The Astronomer off-exhibit in May. Was that because
the museum had agreed to have the original replaced by a forgery? Klaus stood up to examine the
painting. Was this Neal's handiwork?

"You told me that Neal's forgery of The Woman in Blue was so masterful, it would have been nearly
impossible to distinguish the original from the forgery," Rolf said. "Neal would have had the original
of The Astronomer to consult. This one would have been even better."

"So all our work to make the painting a trigger is for naught?"

"Of course not. The trigger will still work. If anything, Neal's paranoia will increase if he is blamed
for the theft of what he knows to be a forgery. And don't forget, we have the second trigger in
reserve. Peter can only guess at our strategy, and my bet is he hasn't figured it out."

"Why would they want the original?"

Rolf resumed his seat. "That's a puzzle I've yet to solve." He tapped with his forefinger on the sheet
of paper in front of him. "This list of recovered paintings may hold the solution. Two of the paintings
documented on Huber's shipping manifest are not mentioned."

"Which ones?"

"A Renoir—Madame Chocquet Reading—and Portrait of a Young Man by Raphael."

"We have no way of knowing how accurate the manifest was. The Resistance fighters may not have
made off with all the paintings."

"That's possible," Rolf conceded, "but there could be something else at play."

"What do you suspect?"

Rolf's eyes darted back to The Astronomer. "A gauntlet? I may be reading too much into it... In any case, there's no need for further delay. Anya wants us to strike and I agree. What's the latest on Bianka?"

"She's recovered from the mugging. She told Anya that Neal's taking her out this Saturday."

Rolf nodded, looking satisfied. "Tell her to move to Phase Three. There's no reason to delay."

WCWCWCWCWCWCWC

Neal picked up his coffee mug for a refill. On a Friday afternoon, no one was attempting to get much work done. It was the first day back for Peter, Diana, Jones, and Travis. Processing their emails and catching up on Bureau bulletins were enough of a challenge. Neal, always the overachiever, had gone the extra mile. He'd made a couple of cartoons of the team as pirates for the bulletin board in his art niche. The Jolly Roger would have to be carefully stowed away till another adventure beckoned.

Diana was in the breakroom, pouring a generous amount of the Bureau's select swill du jour into the octopus mug Christie had given her. That could mean only one thing.

"Heading for your writer's cave?" he asked.

"Life's returning to normal," she said with a nod. "You realize Jones may need a new hobby now that his work no longer revolves around U-boats."

"I suspect his girlfriend Helen will supply him with ideas."

"How about you? You had a full round of classes on Wednesday. Was it difficult to get back into grad student mode?"

"Not so much. The con served as my homework. I gave my first master class on artist techniques and picked Degas's expertise with pastels as my topic."

Diana stepped back to eye him warily. "You didn't show them Harlequin and Columbine, I hope?"

He grinned. "I resisted the temptation." He moved closer to murmur, "Did the Arkham Round Table go along with my suggestion?"

She rolled her eyes. "Surely you're not asking me to divulge spoilers."

"Just a couple," he wheedled.

"It'll cost you," she warned.

"What's life without an element of danger? I agree."

Her smile had a touch of devilry. "Even without asking what I have in mind?"

"I trust you." He already had a good idea what she'd ask for.

"Okay, Caffrey, just remember our bargain. The title of the next story is Lion's Lair."
"Referring to the nickname of lion cub Klaus gave me?"

"It has many possible significances and that's one of them. The cub's grown up, and ready to do some damage of his own."

"I like the sound of that."

"It may also refer to one of the constellations on that celestial globe in Vermeer's painting of *The Astronomer*."

"Peter will approve. Did you include the serpent as well?"

"Um-hum, but you're not getting anything more out of me."

"You can't stop now," he objected. "Did the Round Table agree to my idea?"

"Yeah, yeah. You get to sweep Sara off her feet in Lyon, but the result may not be what you expect. Now it's time to pay up."

Diana seemed to take particular delight in mocking his concepts. Would this be another idea that came back to bite him? It would be enlightening to know if Henry felt the same way.

Diana was tapping her foot. "I'm waiting."

"What would you like? Another origami?"

"Nope, but you should make one for your collection."

"Got it already figured out. When will I have another chance to make a U-boat?"

"Very appropriate. Better make two, so Jones can also have one."

"If you don't want an origami, what do you want?"

"How about a Cosmic Glide?"

Neal laughed. "The dance Mozzie and Neal performed in the previous story?"

She nodded emphatically. "That's right, and with the original music."

"Now?"

She crossed her arms. "Now."

He made a slight bow and set down his mug. Launching into a soulful rendition of "Purple People Eater," he started snapping his fingers and swaying his hips. It was a matter of seconds to coax Diana into dancing, and by the next refrain they were both singing it. Someone must have contacted the lab because Travis raced in and Jones was only a few steps behind. The breakroom wasn't large enough to hold all their gyrations so they moved into the bullpen. Soon everyone was leaving their desks to participate. Peter stuck his head out of Hughes's office door where he'd been in a meeting and grinned at the racket. A minute later, Peter and Hughes both sashayed down the stairs as they belted out the lyrics.

The flash mob ended as quickly as it had begun. Diana sneaked off to write and Neal returned to the breakroom for the swill he'd never collected. Peter followed him in.
"That was a good idea," Peter said. "The full-blown celebration will have to wait till the Mansfelds are history, but it made a fitting dress rehearsal." His expression turned serious. "You got a moment? There's something we need to discuss."

Peter waited till they were inside his office and the door closed before giving any further explanation. "Marcel alerted me to a remarkable coincidence. This morning another missing masterpiece was discovered. He wondered if I knew anything about it. It's a Matisse. *Woman with a Violin.*"

"The painting we expected to find in the chalet? What did you tell him?"

"That I would check with you." Peter raised a brow. "Do you know anything about it?"

"Only what I told you. Since Isabelle mentioned Bergmann's interest in the painting, I'd hoped to find the original in the chalet. I was disappointed it wasn't there."

"Let me rephrase the question. Assume the painting was there. What might have happened to it?"

Peter didn't ask for all his theories, so Neal picked the least damaging one. "It crossed my mind that Klaus revisited the chalet after hearing how much Adler was offering for the Braque. That's great news that I was wrong. Do you know who found the painting?"

Peter nodded. "Camille Souchon."

Neal stared at him. "That's the woman who was Paul Lévy's former secretary—"

"—who now lives in an assisted living facility in Bergerac. She told Mozzie about Lévy's fractal code, and he was effusive in his praise of her, as I recall."

"He was indeed. Good for Camille! She should receive quite a finder's fee. Do you know how she discovered the painting?"

"She'd asked a niece to bring her some of her possessions from the family attic. One was a painting. The frame was loose. When she attempted to repair the frame, she discovered the Matisse hiding underneath it."

Mozzie had gone to see Camille after dropping Neal off at the airport in Paris. He must have engineered the "discovery."

"Camille was active with the Resistance," Peter added. "She believes a fighter hid it at her home and was killed before he could tell her about it. Camille intends to share the proceeds of the finder's fee with surviving Resistance fighters."

"A happy ending! Thank you for letting me know."

A small smile crossed Peter's face. That told Neal Peter also suspected Mozzie's involvement, and he was giving him a pass. "Any word back about the blood work?"

"Not yet, but I haven't had any more incidents and feel fine, so I'm chalking the dreams up to the drug they gave me on the truck. Christie also views it as the most likely scenario."

"That's probably it," Peter agreed, "but there's no harm in taking it easy next week. You have comp time coming from your work last weekend. We'll need a forgery of the Renoir painting that Marcel's holding back. Next week will be a good opportunity to prepare it."

Neal nodded. "With the art discovery made public, Rolf has no reason to delay pulling the trigger on
"Does that concern you?"

"No. Frankly I wish he'd go ahead. That's been one of the unexpected blessings of having a curse hang over me. I'm no longer concerned about any of Rolf's mind games." Neal rose to leave, then paused. "You remember those dragons I painted for the restaurant in Morningside Heights?"

"Yeah, the blue one had a pearl and the red one was chasing it."

"You have a good memory."

"Those dragons were frustrating. I was convinced you pictured me as the red dragon chasing you, but for whatever reason you refused to acknowledge it."

"I wasn't lying, but you were partially right. I identified with the blue dragon. The pearl was my future. The red dragon was the embodiment of all the demons—inner and external—trying to wrestle it away. Klaus, Keller, my own fears and doubts."

Peter sat back in his chair, eyeing him with what Neal hoped was understanding. "I wish I'd known. It would have helped."

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you," Neal admitted.

"Care to explain why you're bringing this up now?"

"Last night I was thinking about the day you came to see me when I was painting the mural. You told me to focus on the big picture—not let the little stuff get in the way of a chance to do something worthwhile with my life. I never thanked you properly." Neal hesitated, passing a hand through his hair. This was heavier than he intended but he wanted to get it off his chest. "Playing a part in recovering those masterpieces is something I'll never forget."

"Me neither," Peter agreed quietly. "I've been reflecting on the twists and turns of fate as well. Adler, Kate, Fowler—they all had a role to play. If you hadn't been swindled by Adler's Ponzi scheme, we might not have discovered the key to the mystery. Even Klaus was instrumental to the outcome by ordering you to steal the Braque."

"You told me I could accomplish something meaningful here at the Bureau, and thanks to you, I have."

"I appreciate that, but you put skin in the game too." Peter eyed him thoughtfully. "We were on shaky ground when I visited you in the restaurant."

No point in denying it. "You went the extra mile to demonstrate I'd made the right decision."

"I wish I'd already met André. He gave me some good advice in Paris."

"What was that?"

"About a sword being like a bird."

"Ah yes, his favorite saying. He lectured me about that too. We've both learned to relax our grip. For instance, now if you forget lunch, I don't even mention it."

Peter snorted. "Or if you forget to return my t-shirt, I don't slap handcuffs on you."
Neal broke into a laugh. Peter still remembered the shirt Neal had borrowed in St. Louis. "I was sure I gave that back," he teased.

"Nope, but you keep it. In Paris, you called me your good luck charm. Maybe it's that shirt which is supplying the magic for both of us. Whatever it is, it's working. Let's not mess it up."

"Steady as she goes?" Neither one of them mentioned the Mansfelds. They'd need all the luck they could get for the next act.

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**Notes:** The Mansfelds aren't the only ones Neal and Peter should worry about. Astrena's a frustrated goddess and an increasingly demanding one. In my next Caffrey Conversation story, Night Howls on the Hudson, she'll take center stage. Henry is heading off for a business trip to Asia. He wonders how much trouble Neal can get into while he's gone. He's about to find out. Once Henry returns, the operation against the Mansfelds will begin in earnest.

Thanks very much for coming along on this adventure! Your comments, reviews, and kudos have all been much appreciated. Special thanks and hugs go to the awesome Penna for her outstanding beta help.

A few notes about references in this chapter:
Peter's birthday is described in two of Penna's Caffrey Vignettes: Treasure Hunt and Wish on a Star. Rolf's booby-trapped house and the forged Galileo manuscript are in The Woman in Blue. Neal borrowed Peter's t-shirt in Caffrey Conversation, and the Cosmic Glide was first performed in Cinereous Skies.

I'm going to take a short break from Caffrey Conversation to post stories in other fandoms. Next week I'll post a story based on The Invisible Library by Genevieve Cogman. The heroine of the series has something in common with Neal. Although she is a Librarian, book thief is often a more apt description. The series combines science fiction, magic, and a dash of steampunk. If you're curious about the series, I've written an [Introduction to the Invisible Library](http://www.pennasilbrithconversation.blogspot.com) for our blog.

**September lineup of stories:**

- September 12: Scandal in Montmartre (1 chapter, The Invisible Library fandom)
- September 21: Night's Witness (1 chapter, All Souls Trilogy fandom)
- September 26: 1st chapter of Night Howls on the Hudson (9 chapters, Caffrey Conversation – Crossed Lines)

Till next time!

Blog: Penna Nomen & Silbrith Conversation: [www.pennasilbrithconversation.blogspot.com](http://www.pennasilbrithconversation.blogspot.com)
Chapter Visuals and Music: The Harlequin's Shadow board on the Caffrey Conversation Pinterest website: [www.pinterest.com/caffreycon](http://www.pinterest.com/caffreycon)

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