Persuassioned

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Persuassioned

by KeJae

Summary

A mix of White Collar and Chuck with a twist of Persuasion. This story is full of mysteries, tried friendships, and a hint of romance before the truth of everything is revealed.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes
Neal was sitting towards the side of the conference room at the far end of the table sketching on a scrap piece of paper. He was present for the meeting, but as it wasn't ready to start, he was instructed to take a seat anyway.

Around him, two teams of personnel buzzed to get copies of the case files distributed, the powerpoint ready to go, determined who was going to be accomplishing what, and all of the details pertaining to working a joint case. The FBI side of the operation was being led by Peter, while the insurance side was being directed by Sara.

Why was Neal drawing instead of helping? Because he was in the time-honored dog house so his assistance was unwanted. He was the prime suspect for the theft of the treasure, and everyone was reacting.

In the office, Peter was keeping an extra eye on Neal and his activities while working to investigate him behind his back.

Jones and Diana were assisting. Peter and Jones had done a Polygraph Lie Detector Test in the middle of the night to both catch Neal off guard, and to keep their investigation off of the books. Diana had been participating in a more minor role as Peter hadn't needed her assistance as much, yet. It was inevitable that they would need their combined manpower in order to unravel the mystery of the treasure before they came to any solid conclusion.

Although the general office had no idea why things were off, everyone knew something was up, so they followed Peter's lead and kept their distance.

Combining the reactions, Neal was receiving the cold shoulder from the office and hadn't seemed like a welcome member of the team in weeks.

The problem for him was that he didn't know why. One minute he had been happy Peter had come to his rescue and saved his life, and the next Peter was livid with fury while he accused him of stealing the treasure that had just blown up.

Neal wasn't an idiot. He knew he had been showered with bits and pieces of painted masterpieces combined with other debris from a wealth of lost history. It was sad really. So many people had been killed for those items, things really on the grand scale of life, and those same things were gone in an instant.

What bothered him the most though, was that Peter really thought he was heartless enough to steal a treasure gained by mass murder. Why would he want blood money so tainted as to have caused millions of people to have lost their lives? That wasn't even mentioning Kate's death, Mozzie's near
death, and the dangers Peter, Alex, and Neal had been put through over it. Really, it was rather ludicrous to think he would want something like that.

Still, Peter was so adamant as to the reality of the theft and determined to prove him guilty of it, that there had to be something. Peter wasn't the type to get worked up over nothing, so there was evidence of some kind.

That led Neal to another problem. If there was evidence, what was it? Peter wouldn't tell him why he suspected him, only that he would have to wait until he had proven his guilt.

Apparently, Peter was also certain he would falsify evidence in his own favor to get away with committing such a large scale theft.

Sighing to himself, Neal was amazed by how little it could take to destroy a friendship and how lost he was to do anything about it.

In addition to all of the office issues, his personal romance hadn't managed to skip the flames unscathed.

Sara also believed in his guilt and actually thought he would sacrifice their relationship for some pretty trinkets and going back on the run again. Although there wasn't solid proof of it yet, she believed his greed was strong enough for him to betray his friends. So, she had ended their relationship.

"You live in the clouds… and I live on West 96th."

She had spoken to him like he was a lost cause like his head was in the clouds seeking the next rainbow leading to a pot of gold. It was as if he wasn't capable of living a normal life, of falling in love, or even understanding what it meant to sacrifice for a friend. Based on her tone, you would have thought he was a heartless criminal with no means of understanding anything beyond his greed and whatever it took to endeavor to satisfy it. Since greed is never satisfied, she spoke to him like he wasn't worth her investing in him for any more time than she had already wasted.

Then, as if those collapsing relationships weren't bad enough, there was still June and Mozzie who hadn't been covered.

June was still a gracious hostess and often welcomed Neal to join her for breakfast like she always had, but there was something different. She often shook her head sadly, like she didn't want to see him wasting his life on baubles when he had been on track for having a real life. It was like she was seeing her old friend Ford again. Neal was a criminal who was so intent on getting his 'last' score, that he missed out on having love, laughter, and friends to help him through life, the true treasures we are blessed with. Although she never directly said any of her feelings, she gave Neal enough extra hints and facial expressions that her message got across.

Even Mozzie was acting distrustful. He kept asking questions about what the treasure looked like and alluding to the possibility of Neal having stolen it for himself. It was like he felt insulted Neal had completed the theft of a lifetime behind his back and betrayed because he wasn't being included in the payout. After several rounds of 'alleged' conversations to discuss how Neal might have accomplished it and how they could spend it in purchasing an island getaway, Mozzie eventually gave in to Neal's greed.

"If you don't want to share, it's your choice. But I thought we were friends Neal, that you would include me in any major plans. I guess I was wrong."
The little guy had left in defeat and Neal hadn't seen anything of him since. He was still around, June was in contact with him and he suspected that Elizabeth still had her lunches with him, but Neal wasn't on his rounds anymore and he couldn't confirm his suspicions with Elizabeth. They hadn't talked since their double dinner date the night before everything fell apart.

Zoning out as his pen continued to move, Neal continued to draw his pictures within pictures. It was something like the Intersect in the way he was hiding his thoughts in plain sight, but within another image to hide them from scrutiny. He felt like an outsider with his friends, which was an unpleasant echo from the past, so he hid his feelings from them and continued to do his job.

"Neal." Peter barked when he was ready for Neal to be paying attention.

Focusing back on the world around him, Neal looked up and stopped drawing. "What?"

"Go get coffees. You know the usual orders for the office. Ask Sara's people what they want before you go too." He dismissed him.

"Coffees coming up." He complied as he laid his pen down. Obviously, they weren't going to actually invite him for whatever was being covered in his absence.

Walking down the stairs, Neal made a mental list of the coffee orders for the team. Making his way around the room as he went, he collected the requests from the visiting team before getting his things from his desk.

Striding along, he made his way to the elevator and began his descent to the lobby. It figured that no one was in the car. He shrugged to himself as he thought it didn't matter, they would have ignored him anyway.

Exiting the car in the lobby, he walked out of the building and onto the street outside. There he was nobody in a mass of nobodies. He was just another person in the swell of pedestrians going from one place to another and there was something freeing in that. No one was giving him dirty looks as they were simply passersby who continued on their way without affecting him at all. The anonymity was refreshing after the hostility.

Weaving his way through the throng with practiced ease, he worked his way to their favorite coffee shop just down the street.

Seeing there was a line, he settled in to while away the time and hoped the delay would give the team plenty of time to complete their tasks before he returned.

Observing the other patrons, he watched as people did simple things like chat with their friends, tended to their children, or were simply seeking refuge from a hectic day. There was nothing unusual to the crowds in front of him.

Turning to stand sideways, he moved for a different perspective.

Out on the street, a young woman was walking by in torn jeans, a jacket over her henley, and a white scarf hanging around her neck. What drew Neal's attention to her though was how she wore her hair. It was slightly long, most of it hung over her shoulder in a rough braid, but a large clump of it was hanging in front of her face to provide a brown shield for her to hide behind. She appeared to be homeless and hungry, but she didn't enter. Likely, she didn't have enough money to buy anything so there wasn't much point in coming in.

While Neal watched, she stood outside the door and asked if anyone would be so kind as to purchase a sandwich for her. She didn't ask for money, just a simple meal.
Unable to watch without doing something for her, Neal started planning.

When it was his turn in line, Neal gave the order for the team and himself first. Then after he had his intended purpose complete, he made an additional request. "Also, can I get a sandwich and a bottle of water as a separate order?" Paying his bills, he put the FBI order on his work card, but the other food he paid for in cash as it was a personal mission.

Gathering his purchases as they were finished, he piled the boxes on the table nearest the door and settled the bags beside them. Moving outside, he approached the girl.

"I have a sandwich and bottle of water, but I have one request for you." She looked nervous like she had heard such comments before. Waiving her concern aside, he continued before she could go any further in the wrong direction. "Nothing like that. My friend runs a shelter only a few blocks from here and I texted him to expect you if you would like to go there. He and his wife will provide any help or services you may need at no charge." Then he passed her a card with the place's location and information.

Feeling less threatened, she took the card and meal before wandering off in the direction of the shelter.

Hoping she would take his friend up on the services he provided, Neal returned to reclaim his purchases. Sliding the bags of food up his arm, he lifted the boxes of drinks and carefully balanced them between his hands.

Taking the trip back to the office at a slower pace, he worked to avoid the foot traffic and retain his grip on the stack of drinks. It wouldn't do to spill any of them, and the other people were focused on their destinations so he had to be observant.

When he arrived back at the building, he rode up the elevator alone again and made his way back into the office.

"What took you so long?" Peter asked as he came down for his coffee and food. The meeting had obviously ended so the office was looking for their refreshments.

"There was a line," Neal answered honestly. He wasn't going to lie about why he had taken so long, but he also wasn't going to divulge any details as to his extra task. It wasn't work-related, or anything of the team's business. Besides, they probably wouldn't believe he would do a random act of kindness anyway, they were all certain he was too greedy for any such behavior.

Feeling a vibration in his pocket, he stepped back from the rush of personnel collecting their food orders and coffee that wasn't the office mud.

Reading the text, he smiled to himself as the message said the girl had taken him up on his offer and arrived at the shelter. Neal was relieved to learn she would receive the proper care and her situation would be investigated. Shooting off a quick message, he promised his aid if anything further was needed and planned for another talk after work before closing his phone.

With the meeting over and the office settled down to their tasks, Neal began working on his own morning list while eating his meal.
Evening Occupation

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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Finishing work for the day, Neal went about turning off his computer and closing the files he had been working on. The office was empty of everyone but Peter, and even he was turning off his computer for the night. Feeling it was a safe time to leave without getting into trouble, Neal walked his files up for Peter to review in the morning.

"These are done." He simply stated. Peter could review his notes in his own time.

"I'll have a new stack on your desk in the morning. Do you need a ride?" Peter seemed distant. He wasn't offering the ride for their friendly banter to recount the day, but because Neal was his CI and responsibility.

"No, June has family over so a walk will help me to avoid interrupting their gathering." He made his excuse. Besides, he wanted to check in with his friend about the girl so the walk would give him plenty of opportunities to discuss her needs and how they could be brought about.

"Alright then," Peter said as he followed Neal down the stairs. Pausing at the door, he waited for Neal to grab his jacket before the two of them left the office together.

Riding the elevator down, Neal quietly thought about what his friend had told him. The girl came from a background of abuse and she had run away to escape it. Clenching his hands into fists, he was angry to be reminded of just how cruel people could be. Why did people feel a need to take their anger and lack of control out on others?

"Something bothering you?" Peter questioned as he had noticed Neal's actions. With nothing else to do, he had been observing Neal in their reflection.

"Nothing… of importance anyway. For as much as I can understand and see through people, sometimes they still elude me." He explained enough that Peter knew his problem was due to someone's actions, but not something so important as to describe it.

"But important enough to be bothering you and for you to clench your fists over it," Peter commented to probe further.

"People watching can lead to discovering a lot of things we don't like." Neal pictured the girl standing outside of the coffee shop again.

"Did you see something while getting the coffees this morning?" Peter got more concerned. He seemed to wonder if there was something to this he should know about.

"I only saw a homeless girl begging for food at the door to the coffee shop. Her situation reminded me of things that are a button for me." Neal said before darting out of the elevator.

Picking up his stride to try and catch him, Peter wasn't going to let the situation go. Although he was still angry with Neal, he was willing to overlook their differences for someone else. "Neal…"

"Don't Peter." Neal didn't want Peter to force him to reveal what he had done for the girl.
"What happened?" Peter pulled him back by the arm. "You don't tend to get this upset by simply seeing someone in a crowd."

Pausing, Neal turned to Peter. "No I don't, but then most people don't remind me of another girl crying as hard as her body can stand because she just lost her sister. That was decades ago so there is nothing you can do for her, and the girl today was headed in the direction of a shelter the last I saw of her. So don't worry Peter, there is nothing that needs to concern you." He shook Peter off but held his ground.

Returning to his anger, Peter glared at him. "How did the girl lose her sister?" He asked as there was still the concern as to why the situation was affecting Neal so much.

"She ran away, Peter. No one has seen her since and her sister was distraught to lose her only sibling." He switched to picturing the young redhead crying over the ice cream he had purchased for her.

"So, another young runaway has you remembering some other situation from the past. Why does it bother you so much?" Peter continued to push.

Frustrated, Neal didn't want to go into these details. Even though they were better than discussing the more recent situation, it was still a very personal detail and could reveal more than he wanted to be known. "Because I sat with the younger sister while she cried and we eventually became friends. What if the girl today has someone at home crying for them?" She might for all he knew, so the question made for a good reason while still being truthful.

Unsure of the situation, Peter stood watching him for a moment. Deciding on how to proceed, Peter made his suggestion before bidding Neal good night. "Point her out if you see her again. We'll make sure she gets the help she needs."

Returning the parting words, Neal walked away knowing he was already taking care of it and had no intention of pointing her out.

Once Neal was a little way down the street, he pulled out his phone and passed the time by making arrangements for the girl.

His first task was to get a full update as to what her situation was. Listening, he was given as much information as was legal into who she was and what her circumstances were. Moving on from there, he checked to see what assistance the shelter could provide and was happy to hear that her room and board was going to be taken care of in addition to three meals a day. It was a very good start.

Having completed the initial task, he moved on to one that would take a woman's touch. With a laugh, he was passed over to the man's wife. Discussing as few details as possible, he made the financial arrangements to cover purchasing a basic wardrobe and bare necessities for the girl to cover her needs.

Feeling like a yo-yo, he was then passed back to the husband. It was the last detail to be handled so there wasn't much to converse about. Mostly, he simply promised to get the girl a job interview to give her a prospective income. She was eighteen so she was of age to be out on her own, she just needed help making the jump into independence.

After completing the arrangements at the shelter, Neal called up his lawyer friend who conferred with the business's manager to inform him of the situation. Working together, they came up with a plan as to how they could create an opening for the girl.
Finally, with the situation satisfactorily resolved, Neal ended the call knowing the girl would be taken care of and that he no longer needed to worry about her.

Entering June's mansion, he could hear the laughter from further into the home. She and her family were having a wonderful time together it seemed. Not wanting to disturb them or bring any awkwardness by his presence, he made his way up to the loft as quietly as he could.

Closing the door behind him, he went about changing into more comfortable clothes and preparing his dinner. Considering how complicated his life was once again proving to be, he settled on something simple. It was only him eating it after all.

Taking the time to enjoy a moment of peace, he took his meal out onto the veranda and looked out over the view. Mostly it was the city's skyline and the blackness where stars hung in invisibility, but there was something soothing to it all the same. After a stressful day, he was all for something soothing.

Finishing his meal, it was time to clean up the last of his dishes and move on to his evening activities.

With no fear of interruptions, he pulled out his laptop and settled in on the kitchen table to work. It took a few moments for him to collect the rest of his investigation details from their hidey holes, but with the chance of an FBI raid at any time, he had to be secretive to ensure the extent of his resources wasn't discovered.

Since no one in the office seemed to even think of the possibility of his innocence in the treasure situation, he was looking for the answers on his own.

Looking at his timeline, there were few suspects he could think of, but always the possibility of someone else having been involved.

Peter knew of the situation and had seen the treasure at the same time as Neal. Could he have stolen the treasure, yes, maybe? The man was smart enough and had some knowledge of criminal means, but he didn't have a motive because he was happy with his life the way it was. Work and sweat led to advancement in his mind, to steal was to cheat the way everything was supposed to work. So, although Peter could have committed the crime, Neal knew he wasn't anywhere near the top of the suspect list.

Elizabeth, of course, was even less likely than Peter. Sure, she was very intelligent and capable of doing those things she chose to, but she also tended to be... awkward at anything along the lines of committing a crime where there wasn't something good in the intentions. As stealing blood money for greed didn't have any good intentions and she wasn't the best equipped for it, she wasn't likely to undertake the task.

Sara was more likely, for as unlikely as she was. The woman was a master at recovery. According to her files with Sterling and Bosch, she was their best recovery agent in the field. With her skills, intelligence, and knowledge of criminal thinking, she made for a likely suspect. What saved her from being a serious suspect was motive. Her job was to travel around the world and retrieve stolen artifacts by nearly any means necessary. Since there was no crime spree following her, despite being exposed to vast wealth before, it was generally safe to assume she wasn't doing a side job as a criminal. So, since she only retrieved what she was sent for, and her insurance agency had neither knowledge nor involvement, she didn't have much of a motive.

Growing warmer, Neal moved on to Mozzie. The man had built the signal means for finding the treasure, had been in the vicinity for the rescue, and hadn't been seen for a few days after. He had access to criminal tools, contacts, the skills to make use of them, and the motive desire to buy an
island somewhere. Mozzie was the perfect suspect, minus one detail. If Mozzie had stolen the 
 treasure, then why was he so certain Neal had done it? That question was the only thing keeping him 
 from the number one rank.

Moving over to his next person in question, Neal thought about Alex. Her family had been looking 
 for the treasure ever since her grandfather's days so she had a strong personal motive. Being a thief, 
 she obviously had the skills and contacts to pull off the crime. Then there was the suspicious detail 
 that she hadn't been seen or heard from since before the alleged theft. So, with nothing to contradict 
 her guilt, she was running as the prime suspect.

To be fair though, Neal was taking into account that there could be other parties. There were other 
 members of the team, like Jones and Berrigan, to consider. How many other Nazi lines could be out 
 there that knew about it? What about other people who had learned of it? Adler had utilized help 
 after all. That section was mostly just unfounded speculation with no real details. It wasn't really a 
 detailed line of investigation, it was more just keeping his mind open for other possibilities if 
 anything came up.

Then, he decided to add one last suspect… himself. Obviously, he was a suspect to everyone else, so 
 he might as well put his information into his notes as well. Who knew, maybe he stole it in his sleep?

Having encompassed the suspect list as best as he could, Neal turned to determine what Peter might 
 have as evidence. Obviously, something had come out in the debris, but what?

Thinking through the few pieces of the treasure that he had seen, Peter's knowledge of his skills, and 
 how those fit together he assumed it was something he could forge. In cases past, Peter had learned 
 of his metallurgy skills so jewelry and other such items might have survived the blast by being 
 thrown away from the fire which would be potential evidence. Obviously, he would be suspected 
 with paintings, but they were more likely to burn in the fire. Did Peter get a scrap of something he 
 had seen Neal paint before? That was a potential reason for his suspicion falling on Neal. But why 
 think Neal had stolen the treasure instead of assuming some scrap had survived? Visualizing what he 
 had seen, Neal tried to picture what else might be used as potential evidence, but most of it was in 
 boxes.

There wasn't any further avenue he could follow with those lines and his available information, so he 
 turned to try to decipher what crime had been committed and how it could have been committed.

Wracking his brain, he hadn't been allowed to see the inside of the warehouse, just like he hadn't 
 been allowed to see the wreckage or what evidence Peter was holding against him, so he had no idea 
 what could be inside beyond a general visualization of other warehouses along the docks.

Since he didn't have anything better to work off of, he theorized how a person might steal something 
 from a highly guarded warehouse in an old U-Boat while remaining undetected. It was a start, but he 
 didn't have any evidence to verify which means was the most likely.

Reaching a point where he needed to go to sleep, he powered down the computer and got ready for 
 bed.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you, everyone, for reading, following, choosing to favorite, leaving kudos, and 
 reviewing/commenting :D
In the morning, Neal was getting ready for work when he heard a disturbance downstairs. Although it wasn't loud, there was something wrong.

Dressed in his slacks and undershirt, Neal was drying his hair a little further so he dropped the towel down around his neck and slipped out his door. Walking quietly down the stairs, he paused often and continued to listen to the sounds as he tried to pinpoint exactly where it was coming from.

Reaching the main floor, he continued to follow the noise until he found June and her family gathered around with a vase in June's hand.

Seeing no imminent threat, he let his guard down a little bit. "What is going on? I heard the commotion all the way upstairs." He was mostly focused on June as the center of attention, but his peripheral continued to keep tabs on the rest of the family.

"A vase of mine appears to have faded, but it was specially glazed to avoid that," June explained.

Frowning, Neal wondered why it was such an issue. Was it an heirloom, valuable, or just something sentimental from Byron? The best way to understand was to see the problem hands on. "May I?" He asked June.

Hesitating for a moment, June seemed to be reluctant to hand it over. Then she seemed to think better of it and gave him permission to inspect it. He was the resident art expert after all.

Carrying it over to the nearest table, Neal began his preliminary investigation into what was wrong with the vase.

First, he flipped it and looked at the artist's name on the bottom. Reading Diego Athanasiou, he knew the vase was valuable, which was likely part of the concern, but something about the famous name didn't look right. Keeping the detail in mind, he mulled over the likely causes while turning it for better lighting.

Moving on the edge of the bottom, he compared the unexposed bottom of the vase to the front, and then to the exposed back. The rear had obviously been the side to face the window and receive the sunlight, which would normally explain the fading, but then Athanasiou took extra care to ensure his work was protected from UV ray light as best as possible. That extra protection was just part of what made his work so expensive and valuable.

Having completed his initial observation, he pulled out his phone and took pictures to document his findings.

Finally, he asked for a paint sample. "Do you mind if I scrape a little off of the bottom for testing?"

Giving her permission, June had been afraid of his conclusion. "It is a forgery, isn't it?"

"I'm afraid it looks like it," Neal said. "Diego Athanasiou is renowned for his Greek inspiration in honor of his family heritage, so this looks like his work. But, when he completes one of his
masterpieces, he always ensures it will stand the test of time as best as he can so he has invested in UV ray protection to prevent 'any brilliance from fading' which means this wasn't treated by him. Then combine that with the name on the bottom, and I am sure of it."

"What is wrong with the name on the bottom?" One of the family members asked.

Flipping the vase over so they could all see, Neal showed them what he meant. "If you look closely, you can see extra broad points where the brush stroke wasn't as smooth. Whoever did this, they had to pause and check their spelling."

Looking rather downcast, June was just as certain the vase was forged. The question was, when was it forged? Did she purchase a forgery? But Byron had been so sure he was working with a reputable dealer and had inspected it himself. Was it stolen sometime after being placed in their home? If so, when had it been done and by whom? Her staff had been with her for years so they were well trusted. With a sinking heart, she felt herself wondering if perhaps Neal had done it. She didn't want to believe it as he had been such a friend to her, but it was either him or a trusted staff member she had known for years longer…

Neal had turned his attention to documenting the situation in the hopes of solving the case quickly. "Do you have any pictures from when you first purchased it?"

Focusing back onto her surroundings, June tried to place whether she had one or not. "I do believe we had to take one for insurance. Are you looking to see if it was a fake from the beginning? Byron was so sure we had an original, how could we have ended up with a forgery?" She voiced some of what she had been thinking.

Soothing her, Neal explained. "This was done fairly well. The vase itself looks like the original, the hesitation could have been missed if the lighting didn't show it, and the fading detail was what brought the forgery to attention. Byron had a good eye from what you have said and this would have been a large purchase, so I doubt he missed the signature flaw. That means it was probably stolen at some point since it has been in your household, but I would keep the possibility that he might have missed it just in case. It never hurts to have all of your bases covered."

"Why do we need the picture then?" June's daughter asked. She seemed to be looking at Neal suspiciously, just like the rest of the family.

"The picture can be magnified and studied to see if the original purchase and the one that you have are exactly identical. If there was also a picture of the signature taken, it will be an easier means of verifying if you still have the same one." Neal explained the purpose and direction the investigation would take.

"Is there any other way to investigate?" Cindy pushed further. She was an art student herself and knew older pictures weren't as reliable as modern pictures when it came to pixels and the visibility of details.

Appreciating her thoroughness, Neal continued to explain the details. "Yes, there is the fading itself. By taking paint samples from both sides, they can be compared to see how much the one side differs from the other. Then the white from the side that has been exposed to the light can also be compared to the white on the bottom edge that has not been exposed. Although it's only a rough means, it can be estimated how long the vase has been sitting in the window and likely how long it has been since the original was stolen."

Continuing to take notes as he jotted down the details of their comments and his observations, Neal noticed one more problem.
"Another thing, these gold colors in the background are not quite right. They are really close, but Athanasiou generally uses a more vibrant yellow for the smaller details to make them pop better, and less orange to the primary details as he prefers yellow over orange in color. Whoever did this, they either don't have a good eye for color, or enough knowledge to know how important it was for the artist to personalize his work by using his favorite shades of colors. Knowing the artist is a key element to a forgery, so another note about the suspect is that they are someone with a good eye for talent, but a lack of detailed knowledge."

Having completed a preliminary investigation of his own as far as he could go with the naked eye and information off the top of his head, he figured it was time to take things to the next step. "I should go finish getting dressed, but I'll text Peter to come in when he gets here instead of waiting for me outside. He'll be interested to know what is going on and can help you start an official investigation as I am assuming you don't want my help any further. In the meanwhile though, it's a good idea to contact your insurance provider, because the sooner they are involved, the smoother it will all go." Neal had noticed the growing suspicion on the faces of everyone in the room. It was obvious he was becoming another prime suspect in a crime he hadn't committed.

Sighing to himself, he ignored the looks and moved to head back upstairs with his notes in hand.

Reaching the loft, he grabbed his phone and texted Peter as promised. With that finished, he moved to scan his notes into his computer in between getting ready for the day. He was going to be the prime suspect, so he might as well keep as many details for his own investigation as possible.

After he had finished his routine, he went back downstairs to see if Peter had arrived yet.

Reaching the main floor again, he found the man deep in conversation with June, so he approached to see if his observations were wanted or not.

"I scanned my notes into my computer so I don't need them anymore." He said as he passed them to the stern agent. "Do you want me to walk you through how I came to those conclusions?"

"No Caffrey, June has already given me the details you mentioned." Peter brushed him off and created a distance in a single sentence.

"Why don't you go and get your breakfast, Peter has the situation here handled." June also dismissed him.

Seeing that his presence was unwanted, Neal followed their directions and returned to the loft to prepare himself a quick meal. He was obviously not invited to partake in the family meal downstairs, so it was a simple affair by himself.

Taking refuge on the balcony again, he figured he might as well take whatever respite he could to start the day as it was going to be another long and uncomfortable one.

Once he had finished his meal, he returned to the kitchenette to clean up.

When he was drying the last of the dishes, he heard the sound of someone approaching up the stairs. Apparently, Peter was done downstairs and was coming to get him for work.

"Come in, I'm just putting the last dishes away," he called before Peter could knock.

Peter opened the door to verify what Neal said was true. While he waited for him to finish and grab his things, he ordered. "Hurry up; we should be at the office by now."

Knowing he was even lower in his friend's esteem, Neal didn't even bother trying to plead his
innocence. What was the use without evidence to back it up?

Walking down the stairs was a quiet affair so it didn't take long for the men to reach the main level, walk out the door, and reach the car.

Taking off down the street, Peter had his fury radiating off of him in waves. Eventually, he voiced his accusation. "How could you Neal? June took you in and gave you everything. Because of her, you have your fancy loft and Rat Pack wardrobe, but that just wasn't enough, was it?" He seethed.

Ignoring the statements, Neal continued to stare out the window instead.

Irritated at being ignored, Peter hit the brakes harder than necessary for a stop light to jerk Neal forwards. "What? No pleas for your innocence? I know you aren't going to be honest, but you aren't even trying." Thinking better of it, he continued. "Which is probably a good thing though; because if I heard you make one excuse right now I wouldn't drive you to the office, but rather straight to jail."

There it was again. Neal wasn't even looking at Peter. He had already seen the furious hurt look in his closest friend's eyes a few too many times, and he didn't want the burden of another round.

"Look at me, Neal!" Peter ordered. He didn't like Neal's continued stare out the window at the traffic like he could ignore the situation if he just looked the other way.

Turning calmly, Neal kept his own hurt at Peter's mistrust and obvious fury to himself. Instead, he was back to wearing a mask, their friendship was over.

"Why aren't you saying, or doing anything? At least you had comments to make in the case of the treasure." Peter spat out the words.

"I also plead my innocence in the case of the diamond necklace, but no one would listen until I had proof the FBI was framing me, and you still won't trust me in the case of the treasure despite being one of the key witnesses that I had nothing to do with whatever happened. Consider them lessons learned." The words were kind of mean and seemed rather like punches to remind Peter of his past mistake in comparison with the same situation happening again, but Neal couldn't refrain from taking the only chance he had. If Peter ignored it, then their friendship might never be repaired.

Surprised, Peter hadn't even thought about the earlier case. The reminder that he had followed the 'evidence' before in the wrong direction soothed some of his fury. Although Neal was still his prime suspect in both crimes, maybe he should cut back on the accusations a little bit… just in case.

Breathing out in a huffed snort, he stopped berating Neal and chose to regain control of his temper for the remainder of the drive.

Feeling his shoulders relax a little, Neal could see that Peter had understood his reminder. He was still the prime suspect, but at least Peter was being a little less aggressive with him.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you, everyone, for reading, reviewing/commenting, leaving kudos, and choosing to favorite :D
Pulling into the parking structure, Peter kept the doors locked for just a moment. "I hope you prove us wrong again." Then the doors were unlocked and he was walking into the office.

Smiling slightly, Neal knew they weren't friends again, but at least he knew they had a chance. "I can assure you, I intend to do just that." He said to himself as he moved to catch up.

Walking into the office building, Peter kept a thoughtful silence as Neal remained by his side. He was still furious at Neal if he had committed the crimes, but he tempered it down until he could further verify it. Neal's reminder had him wanting to double check the accuracy of his information but also questioning Neal's motive for bringing it up. Was Neal reminding him of the situation from before so he didn't jump to the wrong conclusion again, or was he trying to distract him from the truth because he was guilty? Unable to determine which, he would keep his guard up and push on to discover the truth at the root of the problem.

Reaching the elevator, Peter turned to him, "The truth will out, Neal."

"Good, the sooner the better," Neal said as he looked him in the eyes.

For a moment, the two of them stood in a silent staring match while Peter tried to gauge how Neal meant it. He wanted to believe the surface of it, that Neal was innocent, but he couldn't help but question it with all of the evidence stacking up against him.

After giving him a moment, Neal sighed as he turned back towards the doors. "But I will always be in question... cops don't trust con artists after all." His voice fell in disappointment. Even once he was cleared this time, another case would happen another day that would destroy their relationship again... it was the cycle of his life.

Not knowing what to say, Peter stayed to his side of the elevator and chose not to say anything at all. What could he say? Neal was right; he didn't trust him... never completely. He always had his trouble radar for looking for signals in the back of his mind, and Neal continuously gave him just enough reason that he never shut it off.

Reaching the office floor in awkward silence, Neal let Peter lead the way as he fell into step behind him.

While Peter continued up to his office, Neal stopped off at his desk.

Pausing, Neal took his hat off and placed it on the desk before slipping his jacket off to hang behind it. Then he started his computer and went to get himself a cup of office brew while it booted up.

Standing at the break area he could feel the piercing stares penetrating him from around the room. As it usually goes, word traveled fast. It was hardly past the usual start of the day and the entire team already knew about June's robbery, so it wasn't hard to guess who the favorite suspect was.

Ignoring them the same as he had been, Neal simply continued to stir plenty of cream and sugar into the sludgy brew. It wouldn't make the consistency any better, but it might help mask the taste enough
to make it drinkable. Since no one else in the office had been drinking it, Neal suspected it was just another form of punishment, bad coffee for the bad consultant. He had been in worse situations and at least the FBI didn't get as petty in their retribution as others had in the past, so Neal simply soldiered his way through.

Returning to his desk, Neal sat his cup down on the museum coaster he had bought the first time Peter had taken him to the Met without the cause of an investigation. It was more interesting than the generic one he had been using before and it had a memento feeling to it from one of the first times Peter had gone an extra mile for him as a friend instead of his CI.

It was time for Neal to get to work as his computer was humming and there was a pile of files staring him in the face. Knowing what this punishment contained, he wasn't the least bit surprised to find another boring mortgage fraud case in the file. Recent experience had taught him that his workload had been reduced to only the most boring and uninspiring cases that could be thrown his way.

Glancing up at the conference room, he figured the secret case was one reason why he was being relegated to the boring work. It freed the valuable assets of the team for whatever they were doing behind the closed door.

The other reason was probably to avoid temptation. Supposedly he had already succumbed to the treasure, why would the FBI wish to provide him with any more targets?

Attempting to shake off the melancholy mood that had descended, Neal took a preliminary glance through for a general feeling as to how the case would progress and collected the office resources he would need to solve it.

Throwing most of his focus into the files, he kept some attention on his surroundings as was second nature. He had been burned too many times to let his guard down and there was too much at risk if he did.

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As the day progressed and the mortgage files got more and more boring, Neal reached the point he needed a break before he ended up cross-eyed.

Brown bagging it at his desk for lunch, Neal cleared his files away to the side and sketched alien worlds to wake himself up.

For some reason, the scene was a barren and lonely desert full of dangers with hints at lurking foes. The mountains seemed to stand blurry in the far distance like sentinels guarding the border of his prison. Covering the miles in between were high and craggy rocks forming canyon walls while the floor was littered with jagged pieces making it a treacherous place to be. Then, shimmering in the dust was the hint of Peter's face. It was difficult to make out as it was drawn lightly with many little dots, but when it was seen, it was obviously the furious look Peter had worn in the car when he forced Neal to look at him.

Already haunted by the image anyway, Neal brushed the paper off of his desk and into the trash before getting up and leaving the room. He needed a break from their scrutiny to let his walls down and take off the mask. None of them could know the truth, so he had to seek solitude to regroup.

Unknowingly, he left the picture open to be seen by not crumpling it up. Peter had been coming down the stairs on his way to lunch when he had seen Neal unceremoniously flick the page off of his desk. Curious as to what it could be, he retrieved it and carried it with him.
Riding the elevator down alone, Peter looked at the picture and tried to understand what had bothered Neal so much. Sure, it was a rather lonely and desolate place, but there was a beauty to the way he drew the viewer into the setting. Looking at it was actually making Peter kind of thirsty and had him wondering why the elevator was a little warm.

Pondering it, Peter had a sudden thought, was it a depiction of how Neal felt? Like an insight into his current emotional state? It wasn't good if that was the case.

Feeling a pang of guilt, Peter ignored it. All of the evidence pointed to Neal and he seemed to be the likely suspect in both cases. It wasn't his fault Neal was facing the consequences of his actions.

'But what if they weren't his actions?' bounced through his mind again. Shaking his head, Peter fought the questions Neal had brought up. Why did the man have to make everything so hard?

Thrusting the argument out of his head altogether, Peter was going to try and enjoy lunch with his wife so he didn't want Neal ruining it with his head games.

Exiting the elevator, he met Elizabeth in the lobby with a greeting kiss before steering her out the doors.

"How has your day been?" He started up a conversation with her.

"What is wrong Peter?" She ignored him. "Did Neal do something to June?" Her tone got an angry ring to it. She knew Peter had left early to investigate a situation at June's.

"Nothing… maybe, I don't know." So much for that, Peter thought.

"Oh honey, that is not nothing. Start from the beginning." Elizabeth didn't like to see her husband upset and the best way to help was to understand.

"We have another case and Neal is the prime suspect." He went on to explain how June's vase had faded, the forged signature, and the theory Neal had forged it sometime after taking up residence in her home.

"That's awful!" Elizabeth gasped. "How did Neal react to it being discovered?"

Shrugging with a sigh, Peter relayed June's answer. "According to June and the family, he came downstairs acting rather alert after hearing the commotion. Then when he looked the vase over, he went through details and shared his notes like it was an impersonal investigation while keeping his comments to the family professionally friendly. He didn't hold back a thing as far as we can tell, but was it an act to throw us off, or real because he is genuinely innocent?"

"But why keep such a distance, June is his friend and he has also become friends with some of her family?" Elizabeth questioned.

"Because he has been being distant with all of us lately. In the office, he does his work, takes the sludge that is being engineered for him without complaint, and ignores the office in general. No one has been really talkative to him beyond the necessary, and most seem to have built their walls back up stronger than they were when he first started, so there isn't much interaction anyway." Running his fingers through his hair, Peter was at a loss as to what to do. "If Neal really is guilty, then this is only the beginning because he will go to jail for life after this, but if he isn't…"

"Is there a reason to question his innocence? I thought everything looked pretty sure and you were just waiting to remove any benefit of a doubt by having something to better tie him to the painting sample." Elizabeth was still incensed that Neal had the audacity to do such a thing. To give up his
life with them for a life on the run, what happened to the story that he was tired of running?

"That still stands, but… it's something he said when I accused him of robbing June that reminded me." Peter paused as he pictured Neal's masked expression when he said it. Neal didn't trust him to watch his back anymore. He had lost all progress in getting behind those façade of his because they were obviously back with a vengeance. Sighing, Peter couldn't entirely blame him. What Neal said had him feeling like maybe he had let his partner down. It was a very slim chance, but the crack had made its presence known.

"What did he say?" Elizabeth asked suspiciously.

"Do you remember the Steinmetz pink diamond necklace?" At her nod and comprehension, he continued. "Everything pointed to him then too. His anklet data had been conveniently erased and they even put his signature on the necklace making it a perfect set up of evidence… but Neal was innocent the whole time while no one believed him. I even arrested him and made him do the perp walk for a crime he didn't commit." It had been a shame then, and it was one he didn't want to repeat. That feeling gave him caution, something he hoped he wouldn't regret later.

"So, he reminded you that he had been innocent last time when the deck was stacked against him. Do you think he is playing on your sympathies to get you to lower your guard, or that he might genuinely be innocent?" Elizabeth was frustrated. Neal just had to throw her husband for a loop when he was just starting to adjust to him being guilty.

"Good question… it has been warring in my head all day, and wasn't helped by this." He passed her the drawing.

Gasping lightly, Elizabeth still wasn't used to seeing someone randomly sketch something so beautiful. Neal was the only artist she knew as a friend or had known. "He drew this?"

"Yes, notice how barren and desolate the landscape is? If it's a depiction of his emotions, then he is certainly feeling the isolation." Peter sounded a little guilty. The office's treatment wasn't hurting Neal, so he hadn't moved to intervene, and he himself wasn't spending any quality time with him either. Maybe he should pay a little more attention though, as the man was his responsibility after all.

Understanding Peter's battle, Elizabeth asked. "Has he done any other drawings lately that might show his perspective any further?"

"Just the one I have at work. He drew it yesterday while he was waiting for the team meeting to get started. The thing was so confusing and complex that I don't know what to make of it. As far as I can understand it, there are dozens of pictures within pictures. Whatever he felt while drawing that one, he didn't want to share it." There was another pang. Neal seemed to be hurt by their treatment, but he was reacting by hiding behind calm and professional masks making his appearance unusually bland.

Finding herself just as unsure and tangled as Peter was, Elizabeth didn't know how to help. "Bring it home with you tonight. I would like to see it. Maybe we'll figure it out if we work on it together?"

"We can try, but I have a feeling Neal is a lot more complicated than we give him credit for," Peter commented on the sudden thought. The man was a master of perception, what could he be hiding behind those façades? There was a time when he thought he knew him and had deciphered the puzzle, but lately, Peter was right back to riddling his way through Neal's character.

Chapter End Notes
Thank you, everyone, for reading, reviewing/commenting, and leaving kudos :D
Walking back into the office, Neal had regained his composure for handing the antagonistic atmosphere. Squaring his shoulders and reaffixing his mask of indifference, he settled back into his desk and began to work on the case files again.

It didn't take long before Peter returned from his lunch.

Expecting to be ignored, Neal kept his head low and worked diligently on the case file. When Peter paused, he didn't know what to expect and tensed slightly in fear of the unknown.

"Are those cases coming together?" Peter made a bland conversation starter.

Looking up, Neal could see Peter wasn't trying to be patronizing. The agent was just making awkward conversation for the first time in a long while. "Easily enough. These aren't challenging, just boring." He responded in kind, with distant professionalism.

"Good… good." Peter seemed to be trying to figuring out how to broach whatever subject was on his mind, but he was interrupted when Sara entered the office.

"I have an update on our case, Peter." She seemed to be nervous as she approached Neal's vicinity.

"Sara," Neal calmly acknowledged her before ducking his head back to the folder as if he was physically removing himself from their presence.

"Caffrey," Sara acknowledged in return before focusing back onto Peter. "Can we speak in your office? We need to make arrangements for tomorrow."

Peter hesitated but agreed before leading Sara up to his office.

Neal relaxed his shoulders after the doors closed while continuing to work. If it was important, then Peter would find a way to get it said, but at least it might not be in front of the entire office.

Keeping his focus on the files and making good headway on his stack, Neal had accomplished quite a bit before Sara exited Peter's office.

"I'll bring them over in the morning so we can get all of the information at the same time. They have been hard enough to nail down that we want to take advantage of this chance." She was saying as she walked down the stairs.

"The team and I will get our paperwork together tonight." Peter agreed that it was best to get the work done while they had an opportunity.

Having completed her tasks with the FBI for the day, Sara walked out in a hurry to make arrangements with her own company so they would also have their paperwork ready for the meeting.

Feeling the light breeze as she passed and hearing the door close, Neal knew precisely when she was gone. Sighing slightly, he noticed she didn't even take the time to bid him goodbye.
While the team met with Peter in order to organize their side of the case for the next morning and then ran around endeavoring to get everything together, Neal simply sat at his desk and worked his way through one file after another.

When the end of the day finally came, Neal walked the pile up to Peter's office and quietly laid them on his desk before slipping back out with Peter hardly having a chance to realize he was even there.

"Neal," Peter called.

Stepping back in, Neal looked at him quietly, "Don't, Peter."

"Are you okay?" Peter asked anyway.

"I'm fine, Peter. Eventually, I will figure out what happened with each case, and then maybe things will get back to normal." He addressed Peter's obvious concerns.

Frowning, Peter didn't like the assumption that he and the team would fail to get to the truth. "Why do you think you have to solve the cases by yourself?"

"Remember, the Steinmetz diamond necklace case? This is just another part of that lesson. I need to have evidence of my innocence first, and so far I don't have any." There was a distance to him. He was almost pushing Peter away so the agent didn't get caught too close to the fire with him.

Feeling like he had been punched in the gut, Peter wasn't sure if he should be upset or angry. "So, we suspect you of crimes that the evidence points to you as the most likely suspect of and you walk away from us? Last time you came to us for help." The anger won out.

Looking Peter straight in the eyes, Neal answered. "You don't believe me when I tell you the complete truth. Either you believe any evidence that points to the contrary, or you question me because I'm a con. So if I want you to believe me in these situations, I have to have strong evidence to verify my innocence. Until then, I am on my own."

"And you think that helps? You say you are innocent, so then help us prove it!" Peter challenged.

"You don't want or need my help. There is a reason I am sitting down there working mortgage fraud cases instead of the ones that actually fit in my specialties, and that is because no one trusts me with anything more than the barest minimum. As for proving my innocence, if you and Sara aren't good enough witnesses, Mozzie hating me for supposedly stealing the treasure without him doesn't mean that my most likely accomplice wasn't involved, and the anklet proving I was nowhere near the treasure isn't enough, then there isn't a thing I can do help anyway." Neal finished as he started to turn away.

There was that kicking was in his gut again. A part of Peter felt there was definitely something to what Neal had said. Just like the diamond case, Neal kept mentioning though, he proceeded to follow the evidence. He could always apologize later if he was wrong, but he didn't want to fall for one of Neal's head games, so he chose to err on the side of caution in the favor of justice over friendship.

Still, as much as he was battling between friendship and the pursuit of justice, Peter felt his protective side also stirring. "Then let me know once you have the evidence."

He extended an olive branch before addressing his main concern for starting the conversation. "In the meanwhile, drawing desolate pictures and taking everything on alone is another concern. Whether you committed the crimes or not, you are still my responsibility."

Going stiff, Neal hoped Peter hadn't noticed his face shimmering in the dust. The image wouldn't
help his feelings of guilt at all. "You have been collecting my drawings have you?"

"Even if I don't understand them, they are a window into you that can't be achieved any other way," Peter stated calmly, but he was observing Neal closely. Obviously, he would need to look at the desert picture closer. Something about it had Neal freezing like he had something hidden in it.

"Not always, sometimes they are a random sketch while I am thinking." Neal tried to downplay their importance before reassuring Peter. "As for everything else... Don't worry about me, Peter. I can take care of myself." He didn't want Peter to be nice to him out of pity. Sure, being ostracized wasn't any fun, but it could be worse.

"Just... tell me if anything goes too far." Peter knew he wasn't getting Neal to open up to him, not after everything that had been happening between them.

Seeing he was being dismissed, Neal walked out the door.

Collecting his things and leaving the office, he walked home again. Walking was a great opportunity to try and work through the evidence for June's case as well as trying to prepare for whatever reception he might receive. After all, he had been the primary suspect that morning, so it wasn't likely to be a very welcoming one...

Reaching the mansion, he fortified himself for the worst by squaring his shoulders and making sure his mask was firmly in place again.

Walking in through the front door, he wasn't surprised to see June and her family waiting for him. Looking at them, it was obvious they still suspected him and had spent the day discussing what to do. Whatever their conclusion was, it was going to be serious and unpleasant based on their expressions and stances.

Greeting them pleasantly, he didn't try to pacify them. Once he had completed the basic pleasantries of courtesy, he stood silently as if they were the judge and jury about to deliver his sentence.

"Neal... my family and I have been discussing it, and considering the situation, I think it is best if you find somewhere else to live while the investigation is going on." June tried to lighten the blow in the hopes he might be proven innocent, but she suspected him enough to go along with her family.

Nodding formally, Neal responded. "It will only take me a short to collect my few things. I know where the hotel is and can have Peter texted to make the official arrangements while I pack. Do you need me to sign any forms to end our agreement?"

Surprised at how easily Neal walked away, June felt hurt that he didn't even question her or fight for his innocence. "That would work. I'm sure Peter will have something to be taken care of."

Smirking ever so slightly, Neal agreed. "I'm sure he will. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have some packing to do."

Turning away quickly, he walked up the stairs at his usual pace. Entering the loft, he paused to look around and estimated how quickly he could have the task completed.

Once he had a plan, he pulled out his phone and shot off the text to Peter. He didn't want to add to the agent's workload so late into the evening, but it couldn't be helped considering the circumstances.

With the task done, Neal proceeded to grab his bags from the closet. He had packed a minimalistic wardrobe in case he ever had to leave in a hurry. Pulling one outfit, he quickly changed into it so June would have everything she had given to him back.
Moving on to his second bag, he collected his computer, evidence, and the few work-related items he had stashed about the loft. There wasn't much, so it all fit neatly into the computer bag.

Collecting the last of his personal processions, they fit into the first bag with his clothes.

Setting the luggage next to the door, he made one last perusal. Satisfied there was nothing left that could reveal anything he didn't want to be known, he picked up the two bags and carried them down the stairs.

Reaching the main floor, he sat the bags next to the front door before he went to find June.

It didn't take him long to find her sipping tea while she talked to Peter. "My things are packed. I'm sure you have some form or another to be signed?" He said to June and then turned to Peter.

Pointing to the open file on the table in between them, Peter addressed the paperwork. "It just needs your signature that you agree to the termination of the rental agreement. These were drawn up from the beginning just in case anything came up."

Ignoring the implication that his return to jail was expected, Neal simply picked up the pen and flourished his signature. "Do you want to do a search to verify there is nothing in my procession that shouldn't be?" Neal asked the two of them.

"Neal…" June started to say. She didn't like the way it felt to treat her friend in such a manner.

"Yes, mom. You should have him searched just in case." June's son-in-law suggested.

"Peter," Neal turned to him as a means of giving permission to complete the search.

Following Neal with a heavy heart, Peter didn't like all of the distrust that was going on. If Neal really did turn out to be innocent, then this was all going to be for naught, and they would all be feeling bad later. He was already going to feel horrible no matter how it went, but he didn't want anyone else to feel the burden.

Checking through Neal's bags and doing a pat down, Peter verified for the family that Neal didn't have anything in his procession that didn't belong to him.

Picking up the main bag, Peter moved to carry it out to the car despite Neal's protests. When he was in range he popped the trunk, placed the first bag in, waited for Neal to lay the other bag in, closed the trunk, and climbed into the driver's seat.

Before he put the key into the ignition, he paused for a moment. "I'm sorry, Neal. If you are guilty then this just makes it easier for later, but if you aren't…" He didn't want to go into any detail for how badly any of them were going to feel.

"It isn't the first time," Neal vaguely commented.

Knowing he wasn't going to get any kind of detailed explanation, Peter took off for the hotel.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you, everyone, for reading, reviewing/commenting, and leaving kudos :D
Pulling up in front of the hotel, Peter felt like everything was regressing.

His relationship with Neal had progressed to friends, sometimes even family, and now they were back to distant strangers riding in the same car. All of his work to get behind Neal's mask, all of the progress to get Neal to lower his barriers, and all of his effort to get Neal to come out of hiding was simply swirling down the drain.

If it wasn't for the memories of better times, Peter would almost guess he had just released Neal for his work release… but it was worse for the memories. If Neal really had done the crimes, then their friendship was broken, perhaps beyond repair.

The others seemed to be having the same issue too. According to Neal, Mozzie hated him, June had obviously lost her willingness to take a chance on him, Elizabeth wasn't talking to him, the team was distant, and even Sara had ended their romance. Neal had lost every relationship he had worked for over the last few years. And for what? A treasure he did or didn't take?

There were obviously two sides to the situation. Either Neal took it and they were justified in being upset with him, or he didn't take it and he was justified in withdrawing from people who so easily blamed him. Wincing, Peter really didn't like either option, but he hoped for the second as it would mean Neal wouldn't have to go back to prison.

"Stop beating yourself up over this," Neal startled him by talking.

"I was just thinking about how everything seems to have regressed." Peter wasn't going to open up to the rest of what was going on inside of his head.

"Uh-huh," Neal commented, but otherwise let him have his way. Climbing out of the car, he moved to the trunk where he waited for Peter to pop it for him. Once it was open, he lifted the lid and slid his computer bag over his shoulder to lay across his chest before grabbing the duffel in one hand and closing the trunk with the other.

Walking silently across the street, the two men went up to the entrance. Peter opened the door and held it for Neal before following him up to the front desk.

Ringing the bell, he waited for the clerk to arrive from somewhere in the back. "I'm agent Burke. We spoke on the phone a little while ago about a room for Neal Caffrey."

Grunting, the man didn't say much as he got the key and took care of the check-in details with Peter.

Standing loosely beside him, Neal acted just as easily as if he was being checked into some decent place instead of the flea-bitten motel they were standing in. He was thinking through the places he had been to that offered worse accommodations and it was sad just how many he could come up with, but it helped to make his new home more bearable.

After getting Neal checked in, Peter walked him back to the room and unlocked the door before holding it open. While he stood at the door, he was surprised at just how prepared Neal was.
"When did you buy yourself a new wardrobe?" He asked as he eyed the basic suits Neal was hanging in the open closet. It was one of the questions that had been bothering him.

"Saw the writing on the wall and figured it was a good idea to be prepared." Was all Neal said in response.

Continuing to watch for a moment, Peter observed how efficiently Neal settled himself in, like he had already planned. "You even had a treat in your pocket to get rid of the dog. Why did you foresee yourself being evicted?" There was a hint of suspicion behind the question. Was Neal aware of something pertaining to June's robbery?

"June has made it clear she believes me to be guilty of the treasure, and she doesn't approve. Considering how everything else was going, this was inevitable… not her being robbed, as I didn't see that coming, but the whole getting evicted bit was practically an obvious eventuality." He frowned to himself. How had he missed that? Was it before he had arrived?

Seeing Neal settled in for the evening, Peter made the last few official arrangements before heading home for the night.

Having the place to himself, Neal went about personalizing the room. It was basic with a bed, small table, two chairs, and a nightstand for the main portion of the room. Off to the side, there was a kitchenette that contained a mini fridge, microwave, one cupboard, and a tiny counter for food preparation. Across from it was the bathroom which was also very basic and only contained the barest of essentials.

Still needing to get dinner and a few other items to set up his new living space, Neal locked the door and walked to a nearby corner store. Making his way around the aisles, he didn't take too long to make his purchases. Then with his groceries and a few home supplies in hand, he went back towards the hotel.

On his way, he ducked into a restaurant for a quick meal to go before finishing the trip.

Arriving back at the hotel, he put the groceries away and found homes for the other supplies. Then he settled in at the table with his dinner to eat while he did some preliminary work to organize his research again.

Looking around the room, he noticed the peeling paint, mold, and holes that were already in the walls anyway. Figuring that no one would really care, he started to pin the papers up on the wall.

Little by little, he created a timeline across the wall for what little he knew about the treasure. There were his activities accounted for, Peter's, Mozzie's, and so on down the list until he had the holes narrowed down as best as he could get them. Based on the information, the person with the most gaping hole in their timeline was Alex. She was his most likely suspect, but he had no verifiable proof.

Choosing to utilize the smaller wall for June's case, he moved to begin pinning. Mostly, he had the research about when the vase was made, and then what had happened since the forgery had been discovered. It wasn't much, but he had a start.

Breathing deeply as he surveyed his work, Neal knew it was time to be going to sleep. There wasn't anything more he could do for the night.

It didn't take him long to prepare for bed, so soon enough he was under the covers and hoping for more information the next day.
Meanwhile, across the city, Peter was not having the easiest of nights.

It was getting late, but he couldn't help looking over his evidence and the drawings Neal had recently completed. There was something he was missing, but he couldn't figure out what it was.

"The scrap of painting is the same one I saw him painting a few weeks ago. This could be the same painting, which would explain why I haven't seen the other one since, or this could be the original and Neal's is wherever he keeps his completed works. If this is his, then he is involved somehow, or if it is the original, then he is innocent as he says." He rubbed his fingers through his hair.

If he asked Neal to present the picture he had painted, then he would know which one was in question. Either he would pull the one he had done, or he would paint a new one to cover his tracks. The easiest way to settle that part of the case would be to test the sample.

Then the next problem would depend on the results. If it was the original, then there was still the question of how the treasure blew up, but if it was a modern painting, then there would be the question of who painted it and how it got into the U-Boat. How could they prove if Neal did, or didn't do it? That took him right back to his questions about Neal knowing which picture was a part of the evidence.

Since there wasn't any other conclusive evidence, there was an element of guess and gut instinct in the situation, but Neal was still the best person for it.

Granted, Neal had brought up the previous situation where the evidence pointed to his guilt, but he was innocent. There were also holes, like his alibi and Mozzie not speaking to him, but what if the whole Mozzie thing was an act as they were in on it together? Then there were still other accomplices Neal could work with, like Alex for instance. She had the skills and means of pulling off the crime, but how would she have traced back to the U-Boat? Also, if Neal had a treasure waiting, why was he still hanging around?

Pulling up the tracking data, Peter checked for the umpteenth time in the last hour to verify if Neal was still in fact at the hotel. Seeing the dot was where it was supposed to be, he continued trying to work through the case.

It didn't matter how hard Peter thought through the evidence or tried to solve the case. Everything seemed to come back to Neal being the best suspect.

Frustrated, he moved on to the case at June's house, but it wasn't any better. The paint samples had been sent in for testing so they didn't have a timeline yet, June's employees all passed their background checks, and Neal came up as the most likely suspect again. He was the newest person, had the skills, and criminal history. There was only the lack of reason for him to use June so poorly. Sure, there was the financial gain, but he could surely find another way?

Going from one puzzle to another, Peter worked to find something in one of them, but the cases were waiting for more action or information, so there wasn't much progress to be made.

Deciding to take a closer inspection of the drawings again, he studied them for a bit.

The desert one was the easiest to decipher, but he was obviously missing something because Neal had reacted to it. As the desert scene wasn't too revealing, there had to be something else…

"Why are you still up?" Elizabeth asked over his shoulder.
"I'm still trying to make sense of this mess. Neal seems to be so guilty, and the evidence would leave him as the most likely suspect, but I don't have something like a picture to tie him to the treasure case, and there isn't enough information on June's robbery yet." He ran his fingers through his hair again. "Since I need more information to make any further headway on those, I moved on to studying the drawing. Neal reacted when he realized I have it, so there is something in here, but I haven't been able to figure out what." Peter really didn't enjoy feeling like the answer was right in front of him while he couldn't see it. That frustrated him.

"Do you want me to take the piece in for testing? I can have it done off the books through some of my old contacts." Elizabeth volunteered. "They have been very busy with some art shows that are traveling through town, but I'm sure they can work it in sometime over the next week or two."

Knowing it was necessary, Peter agreed. "That is probably the best way to go. Then if Neal is innocent the bosses don't question his presence any more than they already do... but it will be a more reliable means of verifying it if Neal doesn't know. Oh, and honey, don't tell Mozzie either, just in case he is actually working with Neal."

Kissing him lightly, Elizabeth hoped to get a favorable answer but knew they would handle the results together.

"Now, have you tried looking for something that isn't so obvious? Deserts often tend to shimmer and distort the image, so maybe Neal took advantage of that." Elizabeth suggested as a distraction.

Slowly making their way over the barren landscape together, they looked for anything out of the ordinary.

Breathing deeper suddenly, Peter was startled to realize what was hidden in the picture. "It's me! He drew the expression I had after learning of June's robbery. I was so angry with him at first... I almost drove him to jail instead of to work. Then when I made him speak, he reminded of his previous innocence, so I have been fighting back and forth again all day. Apparently, he hasn't forgotten our conversation either."

Looking at the center where Peter had pointed, Elizabeth also noticed the image. It was the angriest expression she had ever seen on her husband's face. This case was really messing with him a lot.

"Based on how he flicked this into the trash, the situations are all bothering him behind those masks of his, but he isn't letting any of us in." Changing to rub his face tiredly, Peter mulled on what had been revealed. "He has been taking everything with a professional and distantly polite exterior which is why I find his pictures so interesting. This one is a desolate and lonely place haunted by my anger, while the other one just seems to be a complex drawing of pictures within pictures. I'm no expert on people's emotions being expressed in their drawings, but I would hazard to guess that Neal is conflicted by everything that is going on, but particularly upset with my reaction."

Rubbing his shoulders, Elizabeth tried to help loosen the knots that were taking up residence. "He has brought a lot of it on himself too. If he hadn't made the past decisions to be a criminal then everyone would be more inclined to believe when he claims to be innocent, but with his past, it is really hard not to see that he really could do both crimes if he wanted too."

"Which is what makes this so hard," Peter lamented. "I don't want to lose my best friend, but I'm not going to let him use me either."

"Why don't we go to bed, this will all be here in the morning and you'll be fresher to think it through." She suggested before leading him up to sleep.
Thank you, everyone, for reading, reviewing/commenting, and leaving kudos :D

I forgot to note before, but I will be traveling for the next two weekends. Next weekend is my brother's birthday trip so I plan to post on Monday, the 15th when we get back. Then I leave on Tuesday for the time with extended family (the trip I wrote the 7 custom princess stories for) so I plan to post either Sunday night the 21st or the next evening after work if we get home too late. After that there are no interruptions until September ;) I know this story has angst and suspense, but I'm glad you're enjoying it and continue to look forward to sharing the rest of it and seeing what you think :D

End Notes

Thank you, everyone, for reading, leaving kudos, commenting/reviewing, choosing to favorite, and following me :D

Back when I was first trying to figure out how to tackle this plot concept, I asked advice from three authors for how to go about that since it was to be one of my most complicated endeavors to date. Fortunately, Quinis, Penna.nomen, and Silbrith were all kind enough to give me advice through what works best for them. Based on some of that, this story has a Pinterest board called "My Story - Persuassioned" for any who may wish to check it out, but I will warn you though, everything is posted there with some major spoilers... I did just go remove the pin with the biggest spoiler though :P Anyway, I want to publicly thank all three for their assistance and their patience as they've waited more than three years to see the results! :D

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!