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What Happens Next

by NoApollonia

Summary

Neal gets taken - Peter has to save him. What will happen next? Set pretty much anywhere in the show, but there will be spoilers.
Walking down a long creaky, dark hallway, Peter sneaks along with his gun pulled. He knows he shouldn't have went ahead of back up, but after hearing from Mozzie there was talk that Neal could be held here, he called it in and went straight here. He wanted to curse each board the creaked, wishing he could do this more silently...and thinking Neal would do so much better if their situations were reversed. Shaking his head, he knew he had to find his partner - he had been gone for eleven days now.

After checking out a couple doors, Peter stands outside the last door in the hallway. Despite his faith being extremely lapsed, he found himself stating a small prayer before opening the door. Inside, he was shocked by what he saw...Neal lying un-moving on a small cot. Walking over, he placed his hand in front of his mouth and sighed in relief as he could feel breathing, though it was shallow. At least Neal was still alive and he knew it was going to be up to him to keep him that way.

"Neal, Neal!" said Peter with a rush to his voice. He had no idea how long they would have. "Neal, please, wake up!" He couldn't help but wonder why Neal hadn't moved from this position or left, considering he hadn't encountered any locked doors besides the one to the basement.

"Ugh." said Neal, obviously in pain and making Peter sorry he had to wake him.

"Neal, thank God." said Peter. "We got to get out of here. Can you stand?"

"Afraid I can't do that, Peter." said Neal, wincing in pain and almost wishing he was still unconscious as it had been a relief from the pain.

"What's wrong? You got to tell me." said Peter. "We have to get you out of here."

"Arm is broken. Same with leg." said Neal, between clenched teeth. "Left side."

Peter took a deep breath, trying to think of what to do. He had hoped Neal at least would be able to walk out of where ever he found him - and now realizing why whomever was responsible felt comfortable leaving Neal alone. Trying to be silent, he listened for any sounds besides Neal's labored breathing. Hearing nothing, but knowing they couldn't risk it, he ripped off his suit jacket and fashioned a very messy sling for Neal's arm, thankful the extra first aid training he had taken.

"Okay Neal, as much as it hurts, I need you to stand. I will support you as much as I can." said Peter, slowly helping Neal up despite his protests. "Fight through the pain, buddy."

"Ow fuck!" said Neal standing on his one good leg, feeling every rattle in his broken leg. Peter couldn't help but give his partner a look as he wasn't sure he had ever heard Neal curse. "I can't do this, Peter." Neal sat back down on the cot. "It hurts too badly....and I just remembered my ribs. I think they are bruised." In fact, Neal was confident at least a few were broken, but he knew Peter didn't need more to worry about right now.

Peter sighed, knowing he couldn't blame his partner. Looking around, he hoped to find some things he could work with. He remembered passing a couple plastic pipes in the hallway and ran to get them. Ripping up part of the sheet on the cot, he managed to fashion a makeshift splint for Neal's leg. He used the rest of the sheet to try to bind Neal's ribs a bit. "Okay let's try again. It's going to hurt, but you got to try."

Neal warily stood up, feeling dizzy. Peter wrapped his arm around Neal's good side and they
slowly walked towards the door to the room they were in. They stopped as both heard noises down the hall. Peter couldn't help but hope it was the back up and not whomever was responsible for Neal's current condition. Making sure his gun was cocked, Peter took a deep breath and opened the door.
Chapter 2

Peter opens the door to find Jones coming down the hallway, all prepared in case he saw anyone. "Diana and Blake are just outside, Peter, and I'd prefer it if you didn't shoot." said Jones, holstering his weapon.

"Glad to see you, Jones." Peter holsters his gun, while holding onto Neal. "I wasn't sure who to expect. Help me with Caffrey...we should hurry. Just be careful as he claims his ribs are only bruised." He gives Neal a look, knowing Neal hasn't been quite truthful.

"Not a doctor." said Neal, making a face as shocks of pain go throughout his body. "So some could be broken. I didn't lie to you."

Peter decides to make light of what Neal said. "How did you get all those doctorates then?" Neal goes silent and just gives Peter an annoyed look.

Jones shouts an order into the walkie and comes up and loops an arm around Caffrey's waist on the other side. "Hey Neal, mind if I help out? Let's get you out of here."

"Hey Jones, how's it going?" said Neal, trying to grin. "And I would greatly appreciate that considering."

Peter and Jones manage to help Neal walk outside - both find themselves apologizing anytime Neal cries out in pain and both figure Neal's in more pain than he's letting on - and manage to sit him up against a tree carefully.

"Ambulance is about 10 minutes out, Boss. They were delayed with the rest of the team." said Diana, reporting the last status she had to Peter. Looking at Neal, she added, "Hey Neal, want anything?"

"Besides the world's biggest pain pill? Water please." said Neal. Diana grabs him a bottle of water and hands it to him. "Thank you!" He starts drinking the water quickly.

"Besides the injuries you told me about, is there anything else?" Peter asked Neal, hoping his friend and partner hadn't been hiding too much for him. "And slow down on the water, you don't want to puke it all back up."

Neal obediently caps the water and sits it next to him, looking almost scared. Peter can't help but wonder how long it's been since Neal had water and feels a bit bad for stopping his friend from drinking it."Besides some taser burns, that's it Peter. At least as much as I can remember with the rest of the pain going on."

"Do you know the people who took you?" asked Diana, sitting down and leaning up against the tree with Neal. She occasionally hands him the bottle of water to take a drink to help regulate how fast he drinks it.

"Personally, no." said Neal. He saw Peter give him a look. "Pretty sure I sort-of know who one is, but only through others. Let's go with he's hired for certain kinds of jobs."

"More questions on that later, but how did you get these injuries at least?" said Peter, spying the ambulance coming down the road. He gestures to Blake to go flag it down.

"Mostly by ticking them off the past couple days." said Neal grimacing, holding his ribs. "I was
trying to escape and finally they had enough I guess."

"Okay, more questions another day," said Peter, patting Neal's shoulder. "Enough for now."

A couple EMTs walk up to the group. After asking a few questions, they load Neal carefully onto a stretcher to avoid causing him too much pain. "Anyone going with?" asked one.

"I am," said Peter, not wanting to leave Neal alone. "Diana, Jones, Blake, secure the scene once the rest of the team gets here. See how much evidence we can find. I want to nail whomever did this to the wall." Peter jumps up into the ambulance and holds his friend's hand on the way to the hospital, hoping they catch whomever took Neal quickly.
Chapter 3

Arriving at the hospital, Peter was pretty much pushed into the waiting room as Neal was rolled back immediately - he had lost consciousness in the ambulance and hadn't woken up. Peter had been hiding the fact he was freaking out since. "You'll have to wait here, Sir." said a nurse, following the EMT crew. Doubting flashing his badge would actually do much, he sat in one of the waiting room chairs. After sending Diana and Jones texts to let him know when they are through, he decides to call El, who has been as worried about him about Neal.

"Hello?" said El, noticing it's Peter who shows up on caller ID. "Tell me you found him!" She sounded very hopeful, and had tried to remain very hopeful over what was close to two weeks.

"I found him El." said Peter. "He's in rough shape, but I have him at a hospital and he was taken back."

"How is he?" said El, sounding worried. "Will he be okay?"

"I won't know for sure until the doctors come out, but tentatively a broken leg, a broken arm, and possibly broken ribs." said Peter, trying to sound calm. "But in time, yes he should be okay. At least I hope so."

"What about the people who took him?" said El. "Did you catch them?"

"We will catch them." said Peter. "But they weren't there when we found Neal." He decides to leave out the part for now about how he went in alone. He knew El would be ticked if she found out - she figured she would eventually, but hopefully after she knew everyone and everything was okay and hopefully would take the news much calmer.

"What hospital?" said El. "I can come out and wait with you."

"I don't want you to have to sit here and be bored." said Peter. "But if you want to come, I'll text you the name and address. Could you get a hold of Mozzie for me? I know you two talk."

"I can do...I'll also call June. June may want to come too." said El. "I'll see you in a bit. Just keep an eye on Neal for everyone."

"Will do. Love you hun." said Peter, before hanging up. He laughed a little to himself, knowing Mozzie wasn't likely to enter a hospital and he might just die of shock if he did. Answering a few texts from Diana and Jones, he managed to make time to use the restroom and splash some water on his face - as he hadn't slept since Neal went missing - before a doctor came out.

"Family of Neal Caffrey?" said the doctor.

"I am...or well the closest he has." said Peter, standing up. "I'm Agent Burke. He's in my custody."

"I'm Dr Rogers." said Dr Rogers. "And it does say in his file that you are his medical proxy."

"So about Neal?" asked Peter, expectantly.

"Well as you probably know, Mr Caffrey had multiple broken bones. Both bones in his left leg, his left forearm, and three broken ribs - two more of which are bruised. He's also severely dehydrated and doesn't appear to have eaten in awhile either." said Dr Rogers. "He is still unconscious at the moment and well we are hopeful he will wake up soon. We did get him on some pain medication,
"But you think he will wake up?" asked Peter. "I'm sorry if I seem rude, just I really care about him as he's both my partner at work and my friend."

"I see worse." said the doctor with a laugh. "Mr Caffrey is being settled into a room, but a nurse will come out once that is done and take you back if you want to sit with him. I'm sorry, but I got to go. Have a good day, Agent Burke." The doctor walked off quickly and Peter collapsed back in his seat. While he originally didn't want to put El through this, he would be happy when she arrived.
Chapter 4

Peter breathed a sigh of relief as he saw El walking up to him in the waiting room. "Hey Hun." said Peter, standing to give his wife a hug. There were no words for how happy he was to see her.

"Hey Hun. How is he? Any news yet?" said El, sitting down next to Peter after giving him a hug, dropping a bag in the seat next to her. "I'm just worried about him."

"That's understandable." said Peter, taking a deep breath. "Left leg is broken badly, broken left forearm, three broken ribs, two bruised ribs, severely dehydrated and he hasn't eaten in awhile. He lost consciousness on the way here...so we will be waiting for him to wake up." said Peter, barely noticing he's clenched his fists in anger just thinking about it. "When I catch these guys..."

"You'll bring them to justice." said El, massaging one of Peter's hands while taking in the information. "And we both know your team will keep you updated. Have you gotten to see him yet?"

"No. The doctor was out maybe ten minutes ago and when I found out what I told you. He said they were getting him into a room and then I could go back." said Peter. "Did you get a hold of Mozzie or June?"

"June is flying in as soon as she can." said El, changing positions in the uncomfortable chair. "And Mozzie, well you know how he is - I had to leave a voicemail, but he should call me back. As to when...who knows."

"Thanks for getting a hold of them for me. Just with..." Peter is cut off as a nurse approaches him. They both fall silent.

"You can go back and see Mr Caffrey now." said the nurse. "Both of you can, but we should keep it to two at a time for now. If you want to follow me, I can lead the way."

"Of course." said Peter, both him and El hurrying to gather their things. "Thanks. We're ready now."

The nurse leads them both to a room in the back. "Trust he's doing much better than he looks - I just wanted to warn you before you go in." said the nurse, before walking away.

Peter gasps as he opens the door. He thought Neal looked bad earlier, but he hadn't even noticed Neal's beat up face at the time and he looked so very pale lying in the hospital bed with several machines hooked up to him. Neal's dark hair and the bruises seemed to be the only color left on him. He couldn't help, but walk to his partner's side and rub one of Neal's hands. He just knew Neal had to wake up.

"Oh wow." said El with a gasp, following Peter. "I thought he was thin before...and I didn't think someone could look so much thinner so fast." She ran a hand through Neal's hair. "He has to be okay, right, he'll be fine, right?" she asked, with her voice at a more rapid pace.

"He's a fighter. He'll be fine." said Peter, not sure if he's trying to convince himself or El. Talking to Neal, "Did you hear me, buddy? You will wake up and heal and everything will be back to normal or as close to it as possible." He was only answered by the beeping of some of the machines. He felt like crying, but knew he had to hold strong for both Neal and Elizabeth.

"Do Jones or Diana know anything yet?" said El, sitting in one of the chairs next to the bed and
pulling Peter down to sit next to her.

"They were finished securing the scene. Diana texted me maybe a minute before you arrived." said Peter, glancing towards his wife. "So hopefully we'll know something soon."
Three days later and Peter was annoyed by how little progress had been made...in the case and the fact Neal still hadn't woken up. He had barely left his friend's side, besides to go home and shower on occasion. The marshals had been being themselves, but Peter refused to put an anklet on Neal unconscious and after a long-fought argument, they had agreed to leave Neal in a regular hospital as long as someone from the FBI was set up outside the room at all times. Peter also knew Hughes likely had made a few calls.

For what felt like the millionth time in the past few days, Peter lightly patted at Neal's arm and said, "Come on, buddy, wake up. You know you want to wake up and get back to annoying me." He knew it was unlikely to work, but he held out hope that Neal could hear him and would know he was there. "Come on Neal, you know you want to flash one of those smiles and bat those blue eyes and get anyone in this place to do your bidding." The only response he got was the regular beeping of the machines. He sighed and sat back, trying to work on his crossword. He wished El was here, but she had an event she had to cover - she had been trying to spend most of her free time as well.

Peter was startled back to the room as he heard a noise. Quickly looking up, he spotted Dr Rogers.

"Sorry to disturb you." said Dr Rogers, checking in on Neal. "I was just coming to see my quietest patient."

"Just wait until he wakes up and you'll regret saying that." said Peter, trying to put a little humor in the situation. "With that, when do you think he will wake up? I know you keep saying it takes time, but I can't help but worry while he's unconscious."

"Relax, Agent Burke. He will wake up when he's ready." said Dr Rogers. "All the testing we've done in the past few days shows there's nothing wrong...and his body needs rest to heal. Speaking of rest, you should go home and get some - doctor's orders."

"I'll rest when he wakes up." said Peter, a bit forcefully. "And once whenever we catch whomever put him in this position."

"You sound like a good agent and a good friend." said Dr Rogers, preparing to leave. "Keep in mind both of them need their rest too." He passed Diana coming in with two cups of coffee.

"Hey Boss." said Diana, handing one cup to Peter. "With the look on your face, I take it no new news on Caffrey."

"You are correct." said Peter, sipping the coffee and grimacing. Somehow hospital coffee was even worse than the coffee at the office. "Any news on the other end?"

"Just talked to Jones and no, not yet." said Diana, not able to hide all the sadness in her voice. She had kept up a tough exterior to everyone, but even she hated to see Neal like this. "Guess that's the plus side about the marshal's deal - we also have someone here to guard the room as well."

"Only reason I stopped arguing there with them. Neal deserves that much at least." said Peter. "Just figured they didn't need to know that. You still the one on duty?"

"Yeah...what the marshals don't know won't hurt them." said Diana, gesturing at the cups. "Plus we're no good to anyone without the caffeine." With that said, she leaves the room to go back to her post outside the room.
Sipping his coffee and glancing around the room, he realized the beeping from the machines had changed a little and he glanced back at his partner and was greeted with a pair of brilliant blue eyes. "Neal?" Peter heard himself mutter aloud.
"Peter?" said Neal, with his voice cracking a little from disuse. "Where am I?" He starts trying to pull out the nasal cannula.

"Don't touch that. You're in the hospital." said Peter, pushing the nurse call button. "It's okay, you're safe. You've been out a little while though."

A nurse came walking into the room. "Do you need anything Agent Burke?" she said before noticing Neal was awake. "Oh, I'll get the doctor...he's down the hall." She turned and left, leaving Peter alone with Neal. Dr Rogers walked in a few minutes later.

"So I hear Mr Caffrey is awake?" Dr Rogers said walking up to the bed. "Hello and nice to see you awake. You've been out a couple days now."

"So Peter tells me." said Neal. "Might as well get it over with - what's the damage?" Dr Rogers recites the lists of injuries. Neal sighs. "So when can I go home? And please just call me Neal."

"Not for at least a few days." said Dr Rogers, checking Neal's vitals on the machine. "We need to make sure there are no infections. While your arm and ribs were easy to set, you were in surgery for the leg. You won't be able to walk on it for awhile either."

Peter sees Neal let out a small sigh. "Don't even start, Neal. You are staying here until you are cleared to leave." said Peter, patting his friend on his shoulder. "And you will be following any and all instructions the good doctor here has for you when you leave."

Dr Rogers couldn't resist a small laugh at the two men, as he had been informed Neal could be persistent and hated hospitals. "Listen to your friend, Neal, you're in good hands here. How much pain are you in before I leave?"

Peter gives Neal one of his no nonsense looks. Neal sighs, "Probably a 7 on the 1 to 10 scale." said Neal, hating telling the truth since he hated being medicated, but knew he would be hearing one of Peter's lectures if he lied.

"Okay, I'll tell Janine, the nurse who was just in, to up the dosage." said Dr Rogers before leaving.

A moment later, Janine walks back in, resets the machine, and leaves a cup of ice chips. "The doctor figured Neal might be wanting something to drink, but it shouldn't be rushed." She gestured at the ice chips. "He should take it slowly." She smiles at Neal and leaves to carry on about her day.

"Ugh." said Neal, trying to adjust himself into a more comfortable position and failing from both his broken arm and feeling weak. "Hospitals suck."

"I meant what I said." said Peter, a little threatening. "No signing yourself AMA...or I'll find someway to keep you here." Peter pushes the buttons to adjust the bed. "Hopefully that's a little better. Want some ice chips?"

Neal nods and Peter gives him a few on a spoon. "You know, technically I was a doctor once. It wouldn't be exactly against medical advice." Neal tries to rationalize.

"Don't even start." said Peter, sitting back in his chair. "Or I'll tell El and get her in here to convince the doctor to keep you even longer." Neal gives Peter an almost frightened look. "And just a few
days ago, you told me you wasn't a doctor when I found you, remember?" Peter decides to fill Neal in on the gaps from when he found him until now.

"So no news?" said Neal, disappointed and he wouldn't even admit it under oath, quite scared.

"No, but I remember you mentioning you thought you knew who one of them was." said Peter. "It might help...and I can tell you are at least unnerved. Help me catch the people who took you."
Neal sighed. "If I'm right, his name is Collum Keetes. To put it nicely, he is hired to take care of rats. I'm not sure who the other two were."

"It's a start." said Peter, with his mind reeling with the news. While he always knew Neal was in some danger for becoming a consultant, he wouldn't have guessed it would go this far, especially as Neal was so anti-violence. "So how do you know of him?"

Neal gives a Peter a look. "How do you think I know of him?" He sighed, took as deep of a breath as possible considering, and tried to mask the fear in his voice. "Basically I have heard of him through others. He's not a man to mess around with, Peter."

"All the more reason to catch him and put him where he belongs." said Peter, feeling himself shiver a little consider he could detect the fear in Neal's voice. "Do you remember anything about the other two?"

"I could probably sketch them." said Neal. "But as for information that would really help such as names, no. They mostly stayed silent."

"It's okay, Keetes is a good start. We find him and hopefully we find the other two." Peter quickly texts Jones and Diana about Keetes and to pass it on to the team. "Now you just need to worry about resting and getting better. We'll catch this guy, I promise."

Neal nodded, taking in Peter's words. Thinking through some of the recent cases with Peter, he wondered which one and which person he had helped take down put him on Keete's list. "So how long have you been here?" asked Neal, finally noticing Peter looked disheveled.

"Oh you know, some time." said Peter, with a smile.

"Peter." said Neal, drawing out the word. "You want me to be honest. So how long?"

"With the exception of a couple showers, as long as you have been here." said Peter, glancing at the window. "You know me, the whole trust but verify...couldn't let you out of my sight. We'll catch this guy, I promise."

"So I can't help but notice I'm missing the anklet." said Neal, wriggling his uninjured leg. "Since it's usually on my left and it's in a cast and I definitely would notice if it was on my right. Marshals actually trust me? I have to say I'm shocked."

Peter laughed. "No, it took some persuasion. It even took Hughes calling in some favors. You have an armed bodyguard instead for now."

"Ooo, fun." said Neal, with a laugh. "Who today? I have to know."

As if she somehow knew she was being talked about, Diana walked in. "Hey Neal. Nice to see you awake."

"Hey Diana." said Neal, suddenly remembering something and couldn't resist joking. "Guess someone beat you to breaking my arm for something."

Diana laughs a little and decides to act normal. "Be careful, Caffrey, you still have another one." She turns to Peter. "We got your text - Jones wanted me to say he and the team are on it."
"Thanks Diana." said Peter. "Anything new?"

"Also I saw El coming in." said Diana, turning to Neal. "Feel like more company?"

"Sure. El's always a friendly face." said Neal, adjusting the covers on his bed, hating standard issue hospital gowns. "Send her in."

Peter gives Diana a nod and helps Neal with the blankets as Diana walks back out of the room. "Last time she was here, you were still out, so she'll be happy you are awake. Just no flashing those blue eyes to get her to side with you on anything, like escaping the hospital early."

"Oh Peter, would I do that?" said Neal, smiling.

"Definitely." said Peter, a little sternly. "So don't...and she's not likely to fall for it anyways."

Neal sighed. "Don't tell me she would try to talk Dr Rogers into keeping me here longer?"

"Try it and see." said Peter, watching his wife enter. "Want to risk it?"
"Hey Hun." said Peter, greeting his wife. "Good timing...look for yourself who's awake."

"Hey Neal." said El, seeing Neal more propped up in bed and awake and handing one of the two cups of coffee she was holding to Peter. "Good to see you're awake, sweetie."

"Hey El." said Neal. "You're always a welcome sight."

"Oh hush." said El, glancing at the tray in front of Neal and not mentioning Neal looked very unusual with a beard. "I see they have you on ice chips. Hopefully Peter's been helping you with those." She gets some on a spoon for Neal.

"Thanks El." said Neal. "And yes, he's been a regular Nurse Nightingale. Ice chips are probably tasting better than the hospital food will."

"Neal." said Peter, rolling his eyes. He was happy to see his partner was up to his old self and wit. He sips at the coffee, which tasted a million times better than the hospital coffee.

"You do know that's torture, right Peter?" said Neal. "Drinking coffee in front of me. Anyway I can steal a sip?"

"Nope. You were already severely dehydrated when you got here. I'm not risking it and you aren't even cleared for fluids yet." said Peter, taking another sip, but sitting his cup of coffee out of Neal's sight, feeling a bit sorry for him. "Trust the second Dr Rogers himself okays it, I'll bring you a cup myself."

El helps out and fluffs Neal's pillows. "I did bring you a gift though." El walked over to the bag she was carrying and pulled out the afghan from their couch. "I thought the room could use some color." She spreads it over the hospital bed.

"You didn't have to do that." said Neal, looking at Peter hoping he was okay with it. Peter shrugs, like it's up to El. "Though I can't disagree with you."

"Good man." said El, with a laugh. "I talked with June. She really wanted to fly in, but Samantha's transplant surgery is in a couple days and she hated to leave her. I told her we would make sure you are in good hands and keep her updated."

"I missed a lot." said Neal, a little morose, eating another spoonful of ice chips. "But that's good news, I know June had been very worried."

"Look at you...always worried about someone else." said Peter. "All you need to worry about at the moment is getting some rest and recovering. We will handle everything else."

"I know. Just hate feeling useless." said Neal, unable not to fidget and messing with the tubes leading to him. He spies Peter's look of 'cut it out' and stops. "I hate hospitals."

"Everyone knows." said Peter. "But like I said before, you are here until Dr Rogers himself clears you...and in front of me. No trying to forge your way out."

A couple hours pass with the trio talking like normal and all trying to pretend they weren't in a hospital room. Peter talks about other cases going on, El talks about clients she's dealing with. El finally notices the time. "I really should go. I'm sorry, but I have to be with a client at 8am."
"Understandable." said Neal, dozing a little. "Thanks for visiting though...I mean it. Sorry I'm not great company." He yawns.

"Oh, it's to be expected." said Elizabeth. She isn't sure how to say it, so she tries her best to give Peter a look of 'Coming home tonight?'

"How about I walk you out?" said Peter, glancing at Neal to see his reaction. "I'll be back in a few." Peter walks El to the door, carefully keeping a side eye on Neal and catches him looking frightened for a moment. He couldn't help, but wonder more about this Keetes character. Speaking to a passing nurse, he arranges for an actual cot to be brought in. If Neal was this terrified, he planned to stay until he's released.
"You know, you don't have to stay?" said Neal, feeling a little guilty as they settled in for the night. "El must miss you."

"Trust me, she's worried about you too," said Peter, spreading out the extra blanket and placing the pillow on the cot. The night nurse, Carlie, had brought both in a little while ago after the cot was sent up to the room. "Plus while you were making excuses not to eat the broth brought up for you for dinner, I texted El and she's totally cool with it."

"But are you sure El is safe?" asked Neal, not really wanting Peter to leave, but also worried about his friends. "You probably should..."

"I knew we both would worry and that's why I have a team stationed outside our house." said Peter, giving Neal a pat on the shoulder. "And Hughes has assigned it so there will be someone with her at all times." Peter sighed, thinking while Neal could be selfish sometimes, he worried far too much about people as well. "And I had a quick dinner in the cafeteria while Dr Rogers was in and had Carlie taking more blood for testing...and you were getting that sponge bath. Remember, you need to worry more about getting well." In reality, he had grabbed a sandwich from the cafeteria quickly and ate it in the waiting room just a few doors down from Neal's room, reluctant to leave Neal for more time than he had to.

Neal grimaced, remembering the sponge bath. As grateful as he was to be 'clean', he had really wanted a shower. "To be fair on the broth..." said Neal, realizing Peter seemed to have an answer to all concerns and growing more tired. "It essentially tasted like nothing...might as well have been warm water. How is someone supposed to get excited about that?"

"The more attempts you make to eat and try to finish your food, the quicker they are likely to let you move up to something more resembling food." said Peter, realizing he wouldn't have wanted Neal's dinner either. "I tell you what, once you are allowed more in options, what if I ask El to bring you by something you like a couple days? I'm sure she would be more than happy to." Peter climbed into the cot as it was getting late, figuring they both ought to get some sleep. He was grateful Diana had went by the house and grabbed a bag from El so he would have a few changes of clothes. Sleeping in his pajamas versus his clothes already sounded like a luxury.

"Fine, but I'm holding you to that one." said Neal, sounding more and more sleepy. He had been falling asleep every few hours. Both Dr Rogers and the nurses had told Peter it was to be expected, and it should ease up more in a few days. "You can watch TV if you want. There's likely a game playing somewhere."

"You sure about that one, Neal, you hate all sports besides the fancy ones, like fencing." said Peter, jokingly, though he had to admit he was missing watching sports games. He just hadn't wanted to be distracted while waiting on Neal to wake up.

"I can sleep through whatever." said Neal, unable to even keep his eyes open any more. "Go ahead."

Peter flipped on the TV as Neal seemed to have fallen asleep, listening to his breathing grow heavier. It didn't take long to find a channel playing a rerun of a game that had played earlier in the day. He turned the volume down in consideration of his partner, at least just this once. He fell asleep before finding out the score.
Peter woke up with the sounds of beeping. He rolled over warily and looked over at Neal. He spotted Carlie checking on Neal. "Something wrong?" he manages to mutter sleepily.

"Neal's heart rate is up." said Carlie. Peter wonders how Neal charms everyone into his wishes. "I think he's okay, but I wanted to check and make sure."

"Thanks for all the attention you are giving him." said Peter sitting up. "He's still out? I would have almost imagined the beeping would have woken him."

"The pain medications can do that." said Carlie. "It's probably best he gets all the rest he can anyways. Do you need anything Agent Burke?"

"No...and honestly, just call me Peter." said Peter, figuring if the nurse was getting to see him in pajama pants and his old Quantico t-shirt, they might as well be on a first name basis.

"Okay." said Carlie, smiling. "I'll see you and Neal later." Peter couldn't help as Carlie left, as she had said Neal's name like she had a crush. He wondered how many women who met Neal didn't end up with a crush on the man. He laid back down on the cot and fell back asleep.

The next time Peter awoke, sunlight was beaming in. "You snore." complained Neal, sitting up in his bed and eating what looked like the world's soggiest bowl of cream of wheat. "And see I'm eating...if this can actually count as food."

"I have to give you it doesn't look appetizing." said Peter, thinking he would need to get some breakfast soon. As if someone up above had heard him, Diana walked in with coffee and a small bag.

"Coffee and a bagel, boss. Figured you would need it." She winked and left the room to start her shift of watching Neal's room.

"You're lucky." said Neal with an annoyed tone to his voice. He couldn't help, but be annoyed that his breakfast definitely paled by far in comparison. Peter couldn't help, but feel sorry for Neal...though there was no way Neal was getting his hands on his coffee.

A couple hours later of bickering over coffee and hydration and a visit from Dr Rogers, El walks in. "Hey boys!" she said with a smile. She hands Peter the newspaper and Neal an art magazine she picked up on the way over. "I was on my way to work, but I thought you guys might want some new reading materials." Turning and looking at Neal. "How are you feeling today, sweetie?"

"I'm good...well not good exactly, but as close as I can be to it." said Neal honestly. Something about El made him feel he could be more honest with her than most. "Dr Rogers assured me I would be in here at least a couple more days." Neal whined.

"Oh Neal, I know you hate hospitals, but it is for the best." said El. She leaned over and gives Peter a kiss. "Mind if I borrow my husband for a few?" Neal waves them both out and they both walk just outside the door.

"Something wrong?" asked Peter. "I know you likely hate me being here..."

"No that's fine." said El. "I was more curious if you would let me know when Dr Rogers clears him for more regular food. I'd love to make him something he won't hate eating."
Peter laughed and hugs El. "You're perfect, you know that. I just promised him last night I would ask you to when he gets the all clear." said Peter. "You are a mind reader."

"One of my many hidden talents." joked El. "I really do have to get in to the office. Keep me updated?"

"I promise." said Peter, giving his wife a final kiss and walking back in to Neal. About time he gets seated in a chair, Diana walks in.

"Jones made an arrest." said Diana, with a smile.
"Really?" said Neal, sounding hopeful. "Go Jones."

"Yeah, he thinks he got one of the men working for Keetes." said Diana, pausing for a moment. "Wait, wasn't there a poet by the name of Keats?"

"Yes." said Neal, shocked Diana knew. Diana answers him with a shrug. She had studied some poetry in college and she couldn't help finding it fun to shock Neal.

"Good work." said Peter, giving Diana a nod. "Think he'll talk?"

"Jones is about to relieve my shift a little early. Something about he thinks I can scare the guy more." said Diana, with a laugh. "Though we all know it's true. I just wanted to give you both an update." Diana walks back out of the room.

"See, Neal, we'll catch these guys." said Peter.

"If anyone can find them, it's you and your team." said Neal, going into a coughing fit. "Okay, that really hurts. Remind me to never do that again?"

Peter shot out of his chair. Dr Rogers and the nurses had all warned him that someone in Neal's shape could easily get pneumonia. He quickly paged the nurse. A few moments later Janine walked into the room. "Hey! Is there something wrong?" she asked, concerned.

"He's started coughing." said Peter, sounding worried. Neal gives him a look and as if to betray him, he goes into another coughing fit.

"Yeah that might be concerning. I'll fill in Dr Rogers." said Janine. "Let me get his temperature first." She quickly pops a thermometer under Neal's tongue before he can protest. Neal stares angrily at Peter, knowing this could all could keep him in the hospital longer. A minute later, she checks the reading. "99.1. It's not very high, but yeah I'll let Dr Rogers make the call." She leaves.

"Peter!" said Neal, with a whining tone.

"Neal!" said Peter, not being able to resist mocking his partner a little. "You are going to only leave here in good health, like it or not." Neal goes quiet, but turns his head. "You can pout if you want." Peter barely has time to get through a section of the newspaper before Dr Rogers walks into the room.

"So Janine mentioned you have a little bit of a fever." said Dr Rogers, kindly, not really giving much of a break between words as he knew from Peter Neal would try to rationalize things to his view. "Let's try some cold compresses and see if it goes down. I also brought some ice water. Staying hydrated is important. Let's see if it's anything to worry about. Sound fair?"

"Not really." muttered Neal, annoyed with the situation.

"Yes, it does." said Peter, giving Neal a look. "Thank you doctor." Dr Rogers nods and leaves. Janine walks in and applies some cold compresses and after a smile at Neal, she turns and leaves. "It could be nothing, Neal, but do you really want to get sick?"

"No." said Neal admittedly. "Just I really hate hospitals."
"Then let's hope it's nothing and you will soon be released." Peter leaves off to where as he wasn't exactly sure what they should do then if Keetes hadn't been caught. Personally, he would like to just take Neal home with him for the duration. He quickly sends El a text to ask.

"Do I at least get to watch TV?" said Neal, giving Peter a look. "You left the remote out of my reach."

Peter laughs and hands it back. "Sorry, I must have forgot to move it back last night. I fell asleep before the game went off." Peter's phone vibrates and he checks it while Neal flips through the channels and sees the text from El that she wanted the same. While Peter wanted to go with it would be easier for them to be together and keep a team watching, he also had to admit after having Neal missing for nearly two weeks, he wasn't really wanting him out of his sight. He would just have to somehow talk Neal into it.
"98.9" said Janine, checking Neal's temperature again after lunch. "Still a bit high, but it's coming down. I think we will find it was nothing serious...could just be you have a small cold."

"Does a cold mean staying in here longer?" asked Neal, looking warily at Peter, who returns his look with a glare. "Just asking for curiosity sake."

"If it stays down, it shouldn't mean extra days, no." said Janine. "I know you are in a hurry to get out of here...more than most patients. Trust you are in good hands. Talk to you again before my shift ends." Janine turns and leaves the room.

"Stop it, Neal, with the charming to get out." said Peter.

"I'm not allowed to be curious?" said Neal defensively. "I always thought you liked that about me."

"Hey at least you got actual food for lunch." said Peter. "It means they think you are improving."

"If thin mashed potatoes and buttered overcooked noodles count as lunch." said Neal bitterly.

"There was also applesauce and jello." said Peter, retorting back. Neal rolls his eyes. They are both interrupted by a knock on the door. Hughes walks in.

"Hughes, what ever do I owe the pleasure?" asked Neal, in his best con man voice.

"Hey Caffrey, you're looking better." said Hughes. "I really hate to make this visit, but since you're awake the marshals want the anklet back on." He holds up the box he is carrying. He sees the angry look Peter has on his face. "I tried to argue against it, but..."

"It's okay." said Neal, trying to diffuse the situation. "It also means less man power spent here, Peter, and more towards finding the bad guys. Let's just put it on so they are happy."

Peter stands and takes the anklet and snaps it on Neal's right leg. "Guess you'll have to get used to it being over here though." Peter said, stroking Neal's foot gently. "Don't think it would have fit over the cast." Peter turns to Hughes. "Should I be wonder if there's more bad news?"

"No, this was the only request." said Hughes. "I cleared it for you both to take off as much time as possible. Your "lawyer" Hughes looks at Neal. "talks a good game about how you would have the right to sue since you were put in danger."

Neal has to laugh as it sounds like classic Mozzie. "I'm not sure that I actually would." said Neal, looking back and forth between the two men.

"Let's just keep that between us." said Hughes, giving Neal a wink. "I got to go. Diana got the guy to talk, but he didn't know too much. But we will try with everything we got." Hughes turns and leaves.

"Stupid marshals." said Peter angrily. "Do they really think you could run with your injuries?"

"You losing confidence in me now?" said Neal, with a smile.

"Were you planning to run?" said Peter, doubting Neal really was planning to.

"You haven't left me alone long enough." said Neal being snarky. Seeing Peter give him another
Burke glare, he follows with, "No though, I really wasn't planning to. But I said the truth a bit ago - it does mean more people who can work on the case and not being on shift here. You haven't left it seems since I came in, so seems I have a bodyguard already."

"And you aren't getting rid of me." said Peter, patting Neal's shoulder. "Afraid you're stuck with me and maybe longer than you think." He spots the look from Neal. "We'll talk about it later." He leaves Neal to wonder as he picks up the newspaper again to work on the crossword. Neal stares at him a little longer before picking up the art magazine El left to read.
Chapter 13

Three days later and no new more leads, Dr Rogers releases Neal from the hospital. As Neal is getting dressed into the clothes Peter brought, Peter takes the chance to text the team and El the news.

"Peter! You ruined these pants cutting them." said Neal, who's desperately trying to dress himself after Peter had turned away to give him privacy. "Do you have any idea what they cost?"

"Do I even want to know?" asked Peter. "My offer to help with the clothes still stands."

"I got it." said Neal, slowly working towards his goal. "Everything seems so much more complicated." For once, he was grateful for a polo shirt as it meant no buttons to do. Pulling it over his head slowly to avoid aggravating his ribs and arm, he manages to pull it down. "Still got socks and shoes...well sock and shoe... to go, but I'm dressed."

"Good for you." said Peter, choosing to sit in the chair he had been occupying daily for about a week. "I still think you are leaving too early though."

"I got the all clear from Dr Rogers." said Neal. "And you've been with me essentially 24/7, so what could I have done?" Neal chooses to leave out the few instances he had tried to charm the nurses on the very rare occasion Peter had been out of the room....it may or may not have helped, so he wasn't exactly lying. He manages to get

"Uh-huh, sure." said Peter, gathering his own stuff. "I will drive you back here immediately if I get any inkling you were released too early though."

Deciding to change the topic, Neal said, "You'll have to thank El for bringing me real food last night. It was delicious as always, but seemed to taste like heaven after so much hospital food."

"You can tell her yourself." said Peter. "She's picking us up to drive us straight home."

"Oh I figured you were just drop....wait you said driving us home." said Neal when it hits him what Peter said in full. "We don't live in the same place. You meant each of us home, right?"

"You saw the papers. Dr Rogers wants someone to keep an eye on you for awhile and you're supposed to stay off that leg as much as possible." said Peter. "And June isn't home yet with the complications of Samantha's surgery."

"It's not a big deal, I'll manage. See I dressed myself and everything." said Neal, using a cane to hobble around a bit. "My apartment is small, I'll be fine. Mozzie..."

"Mozzie is welcome to visit you." said Peter, hoping he wouldn't regret that one. "He was welcome to see you here too, you know. No one was keeping him out."

Neal shrugs. "Mozzie doesn't do well with hospitals." he said. "But he loves my apartment..."

"It's not up for debate." said Peter, using a more stern voice. "You can either relax at my house for awhile OR I will ask Dr Rogers to check you back in."

Neal didn't have to think long. "Your place it is." Peter waves as a nurse brings in a wheelchair. "Now sit." Neal gives him a look. "Again, you're welcome to stay here." Neal groans and sits down in the wheelchair, his bag and prescriptions in his lap. "Good choice." Peter wheels Neal to the
elevator and down to where El is waiting with the car.
"Ugh." groans Neal, as Peter helps him get inside and onto the sofa. He can't help but wonder if Peter had been right about him being released too early...a few steps shouldn't hurt that much!

"You okay, Neal?" said El, worried. "Anything I can do to help?"

"I'm good or will be." said Neal, leaning back on the couch. "Just need a moment. I think I'm finally getting Dr Rogers advice to stay off the leg as much as possible."

Peter walks in from getting the things from the car. "Did I just hear you admit someone else is right?" said Peter, sitting the bags on the steps. Neal gives him a look. "I won't keep teasing. Why not lay down for a bit there?"

"Peter is right," said El, bringing Neal a glass of water and one of his pain pills. "Just rest. We can get you upstairs if you want. It would probably be more quiet."

"I think I'm good here," said Neal, moving carefully to be in a laying position after taking the medication and drinking a bit of water. El pops a pillow under his head and spreads the afghan over him. "Not moving for awhile sounds good." He leaves out he would rather overhear what's going on then feel isolated in a room. He listens to the Burke's quietly talk and wander around before he falls asleep.

A little while later, he feels himself being lightly shaken awake. "Hey Neal, lunch time." said Peter. Neal wakes up and looks up at Peter. "El made you lunch."

"Hey Peter." said Neal sleepily. Peter helps Neal sit up as El brings in a tray from the kitchen, figuring there was no reason to make Neal move to the table. "Hey El...you don't have to do this." he said as El sits the tray over his lap.

"It's fine." said El, as Peter carries in a couple more plates from the kitchen and sits them on the coffee table. "Thought it would be nice to just eat in here for once." She grabs two glasses of iced tea and walks back. Peter and El sit on the floor and start in on their sandwiches. Neal bites into his own sandwich and is happy to find it's the chicken salad with slivered pecans that he loves.

"This is delicious, as always El." said Neal in between bites of sandwich. "That will definitely be a good thing staying here, the delicious food." He smiles at El.

As they finish the food, Peter walks in with another one of Neal's pain pills. "It's okay, Peter, I feel fine." said Neal. He hides a small grimace behind a smile, but not wanting to get too loopy in front of Peter.

"No arguments." said Peter, sternly. "I know it all has to hurt. I've broken a bone before and you have several. Please don't argue, just take it."

With a sigh, Neal reaches out and takes the pill from Peter and swallows it with the last of the iced tea. Trying to fight it off, he yawns. "Sorry, guess I'm more tired than I thought."

"Just get some more sleep, sweetie." said El, gently pushing on Neal until he chooses to lie down. "We'll be around. Peter may turn on a game, so you may want to miss it anyways." Neal doesn't need any more convincing and lets himself fall asleep again.
Neal wakes up feeling Satchmo sniffing his hand. Not thinking he starts petting him. Looking around, but choosing not to sit up yet, he watches the Burke's bumble around their house. El was sitting at the table, going back and forth between what was likely work and the kitchen. Something smelled good, so Neal deduced it was likely getting close to dinner time. Peter was sitting next to El, sipping at a beer while flipping through case files - occasionally looking at his phone like he dared it to ring with news. Neal resisted laughing at both Burke's being both together and doing totally opposite things. He had to admit that their relationship had to be the most ideal.

Noticing Neal's awake by glancing over, Peter said, "Hey Neal. I can take Satchmo outside if he's bugging you."

"No, he's fine." said Neal, petting Satchmo some more to prove his point. "He's good company. Hear anything new while I have been out?"

"Sadly no." said Peter, trying to keep the frustration out of his voice. "Just working on some files while I wait." With that said, he gives his phone another glare.

Neal carefully sits up. "Anything you need help with? I so need to get up and be awake for awhile." Realizing a more pressing need, "I'm going to need to go upstairs as well...you know rummage through your drawers for valuables...or just use the bathroom."

Peter laughed and walked over. "You're going to need help on the stairs. Don't fight me on it, please." He put Neal's arm over his shoulder. "With us both, we should be able to make it up there without hurting you too badly."

A little bit later, both men are back down the stairs after successfully completing their mission and Neal chooses to sit in a chair at the table for a change of scenery. El props Neal's leg up on a chair. "Dinner should be ready in a bit." said El, moving her stuff to sit on Peter's other side as it had taken her chair for Neal's leg.

"Anything I can do?" said Neal, hopeful. "I feel kind of useless...I think I'd even read case files at this point." Peter laughs, sitting a glass of water in front of Neal. "Yeah, I know, you never thought you would see the day."

El can't help but giggle herself. "You could chop stuff for a salad if you want." she said, bringing everything needed into the dining room. She couldn't resist thinking it was hilarious she was going to trust a criminal in their home with a knife - though she barely thought of Neal as one, especially as he was not the violent type. "It would be a help, though it may be difficult one handed."

Neal gives her a smile. "It would be my pleasure, El." he said, knowing El would have easily been able to do this herself and was pitying him and was too nice to say so. Finishing up and tossing everything in with a flourish, Neal said, "All done. Anything else?" He had to admit to himself it was much easier to do with two hands.

"That should do it." said El, tossing some bread in a basket after stirring a pot. "Dinner's done if Peter can put away the paperwork."

Peter quickly clears the table and puts his stuff on a nearby sideboard before getting up and grabbing the plates. "Sorry Hun, just got distracted." Peter sets the table and helps El bring food into the dining room. They both sit and everyone starts passing dishes around, Neal having to be
careful to due his broken arm. Everyone digs into their dinner. "Very delicious, El." said Peter.

"I echo Peter. This is amazing." said Neal.

"Better than hospital food?" joked Peter. Neal gave him a glare. "Yeah, just teasing."

"Anything is better than hospital food...besides deviled ham." said Neal. "But El's cooking is always good."

Everyone eats and is surprised when Peter's phone rings just as the table is being cleared.
Chapter 16

Peter picks up his phone after glancing at the caller ID and walks out onto the patio to answer, letting Satchmo out as well. Neal looks at El, who shrugs and sits down next to Neal.

"Think it's good news?" said Neal, wondering who's on the phone. "I wish he would have just answered in here. I can handle it."

El pats Neal on the hand. "Peter probably just wanted a bit of privacy and space to react considering. Don't worry about it," she said. "Oh, I heard from Moz earlier." El was happy she had forgotten until now as Neal needed the distraction.

"Yeah?" said Neal, looking at the patio door for a few more moments, before looking at El.

"Yeah. He is planning to come by tomorrow and wanted me to say he's sorry he didn't come to the hospital. He went on a conspiracy theory about the doctors putting you out for implants...I admit I didn't pay full attention there." said El, laughing at their mutual friend. "I told him he was welcome to bug sweep here again if he wanted."

"You may regret that as he may." said Neal, with a laugh and then cringing in pain. "Okay I seriously need someone to remind me not to do that. I've bruised a few ribs in the past, but think this is the first time I've broken them."

"Peter broke his arm back around the time we got married...it was on a case." said El, not sure if Peter would want her to tell this story, but deciding why not. "The itching under his cast drove him insane. I caught him trying to scratch it with a pencil and then he managed to break it off under there. He ended up having to have the whole thing recast."

"Oh ouch and sounds like Peter." said Neal, trying really hard not to laugh imagining it. Peter walks back in, making the urge to laugh end. "So what was it Peter?"

"It was Hughes. Jones got the other guy who was working with Keetes." said Peter, happy for the arrest, but wishing they had gotten Keetes. He wasn't going to be able to rest well until Keetes went down...especially as Keetes likely could just hire more people. "Again, the guy's not talking."

Neal sighed, also glad for the arrest and knowing the stories about Keetes and not giving up. "Well think Diana can break him?" he said, after thinking for a few minutes.

"She plans to try first thing in the morning," said Peter. "Hopefully she'll get a detail or two out of him. Until then, though, Hughes is setting up a detail at the house just in case."

El feels part of her shudder. Neither Peter nor El had totally filled her in, but she had gleaned enough details. "Well then it's better we are together." she said thinking. "Better than having to set up multiple details and having to split resources." While she was admittedly scared, she had to admit she'd be more scared with Neal back at the loft at June's alone.

"Agreed." said Peter, sitting back down at the table. "Actually Hughes was glad about our decision as well."

Neal couldn't help but feel bad as he felt he was putting the Burke's into danger. "I hate risking you guys." he said after a long pause. "I could go back to June's or sit in lock up...." He added the last idea regretfully, but knowing it might be safer for all.
"Don't even say that, Neal." said El. "You are staying here and that's final." She tried to use her best serious voice.

"I think you know better than to argue with El, Neal." said Peter, getting up to grab a beer. "She won't change her mind. Trust me, I know." El gives him a glare and they both laugh.

"Fine." said Neal, still wondering if they were making the right decision.
Chapter 17

Neal wakes up in the Burke's guest room the next morning, barely remembering getting up here. After dinner last night, he and Peter and El had watched a movie before deciding to go to bed. Peter had helped Neal get up the stairs and proceed to talk him into taking another pain pill, which Neal decides to blame for not remembering clearly. He hoped no one would mind he had opted to just go to bed in boxers and a t-shirt as he hadn't felt like managing pants over the leg cast. He hoped Dr Rogers would want to change the cast to a boot at the next appointment as the doctor had said he wanted to be sure a second surgery wasn't needed.

Hearing noise in the hall startled Neal out of his thoughts and with a groan, he managed to get himself sitting up leaning back against the headboard. He couldn't help but overhear the Burke's going about their mornings and showers. He still felt bad that Peter had been away from home so much the past few days, but only to himself would he admit he probably would have been freaked out in the hospital alone after his kidnapping. Thinking about Peter and El, he couldn't help but feel bad the nights he had kept Peter away from home when he was chasing him...thinking about Keetes being after him made Neal wonder if all the cons had ever been worth it.

A knock on the door snapped him back out of his thoughts. Neal made sure he was still covered up and decent. He wasn't exactly shy, but figured Peter might kill him if it was El. "Come in." he said, taking a sip of water out of the glass left on the nightstand as his voice sounded hoarse. "I'm decent-ish."

"Hey Neal." said Peter, walking in, choosing not to comment on the decent-ish wording. "I set up the stuff in the bathroom so you could give yourself the sponge baths Dr Rogers has you ordered to to not ruin all the casts and everything. I'd help, but figure you are going to say no."

"The answer is no." said Neal, nodding and trying to get up and grimacing. Without saying a word, Peter walked over and helped Neal up into a standing position, ignoring Neal's sounds of protest. "Thanks for the rest though." He managed to get himself in the bathroom and washed up as much as possible - he greatly missed a shower. He was even able to shave a little, though washing his hair was out until he figured out how to do it one-handed. He was glad to find Peter had placed a pair of his old sweat pants in here - they would fit over the stupid leg cast. Tying them tight, he opened the bathroom door to see El. "Hey El."

"Hey Neal." said El, hoping what she was going to offer wouldn't embarrass Neal. "I was wondering if you would want help with your hair."

Neal thought about the pros and cons in a couple seconds and realized his pride could take the fall for clean hair. "If you don't mind, I'd love to." El quickly sat a chair in front of the sink and Neal sat. Almost expertly, she washed his hair. "I could leave this chair in the hall tomorrow and you could probably do this yourself." She didn't mind and would help any day, but she could tell Neal liked being more independent.

"Thanks El, that really felt great...well does." said Neal, getting up. "That would also be helpful, thanks." He was slipping on the clean shirt he had brought into the bathroom earlier when Peter walks back up the stairs. Neal looks between him and El and hopes Peter doesn't think anything indecent had happened.
"Peter, nothing happened." stammered Neal, a little nervous. If there was ever a time he wished to back away and run, it was now.

"Yeah I know, El already told me about what she was going to offer." said Peter, trying not to laugh seeing Neal nervous. "I trust you with El."

El laughs a little, laughing at the two men. "We're all good. Breakfast anyone?"

Peter helped Neal down the stairs, El having went first to get things ready and to let Satchmo out. After a breakfast of cereal and El giving Neal a disapproving look to get him to take his medication, Neal had just made it into the living room when there was a knock on the front door. After checking out the window first, Peter opens the door. "Hey Mozzie." He waves Neal's friend in, wondering when he got so comfortable letting known criminals in. He shuts up the thoughts since he barely saw Neal as a criminal half the time.

"Hey Suit." said Mozzie, walking in nervously and spying El a few steps behind Peter. "Mrs Suit, always a pleasure." He walks farther in. "Mon frère, good to see you!"

"Hey Moz." said Neal from his spot on the couch and waving his friend over. Mozzie takes a seat next to Neal.

Examining Neal's outfit, Mozzie can't resist taunting. "You are definitely not up to your usual standards." said Mozzie. "You in sweats and not in a gym?" Neal rolls his eyes.

"Peter, I think Satchmo could use a walk." said El, suggesting they give the two men their space. Peter takes the hint and hooks up Satchmo and goes out the door. "Would either of you like some tea?"

"Surprise me." said Mozzie with a smile. After El delivers them two cups of tea and excuses herself to do some work in the kitchen, Mozzie turns to Neal. "So tell me the word on the street is wrong."

"If the word is 'Keetes', then it isn't." said Neal, leaning back on the couch.

"So that's why you are with the Suits." said Mozzie, nervous for his friend he practically considered a brother. "So what's our next move...we could run..."

"Moz, there's no way I can run." said Neal, gesturing at his leg as an example. "And honestly, I don't want to run. Hell, with what I went through, I'm not sure what I want the life any more. I feel I put myself in the position to be on the path with Keetes."

"That's Stockholm syndrome, Neal, and we could if you wanted." said Mozzie, concerned. "And you are born a con man, we all are. There's no leaving the life."

"I don't know that I believe that." said Neal, looking his friend in the eye. "You're still one of my two best friends, which is why I'm saying it to you as I hoped you would listen to what I'm saying."

"Peter will catch Keetes and put him away for good." said Mozzie. "You know that."

"There will just be a next Keetes." said Neal, closing his eyes.
Mozzie stands up. "I think we need to talk when you're more sane of mind." said Mozzie, a little angry. He leaves in a hurry, the door shutting hard behind him. Neal looks at the door, both shocked and not shocked by Mozzie's reaction.


Peter looks between the both of them, wondering what he missed. "Mozzie left already?" Neal just nods and Peter can't help but wonder why Neal looks so upset.
"Mozzie and I got into an argument. It will probably work itself out." said Neal, not wanting to talk about it right now and going his best at his infamous smile to try to persuade the Burke's. "So I heard your phone beep as you came in, Peter, what's new?"

"It's Hughes. He's wanting you the formal statement to get it on record." said Peter. "I have been putting it off, but we have to do it soon as it needs to be put in the report. I hate to rush you, Neal, but..."

"I understand." said Neal, wanting to do anything but talk about what happened, but he also knew he didn't really have a choice in the matter. He had to admit at least to himself that sooner might be better than later in this situation. "So when should we set it up for?"

"Honestly, it could be done from anywhere. We would just need the recording equipment." said Peter, understanding this will be hard on Neal and giving him a pat on his good shoulder. "We could even do it here if you want." It was unorthodox, but hell what with his partnership with Neal had ever been.

"I need to in to check out some deliveries at work tomorrow morning that I've been putting off." offered El. "So I could even be out of the house if that helps." She hasn't gotten as trained as Peter at noticing everything about Neal, but even she notices him relaxing a little at the thought. While part of her wants to know what happened, she didn't want to make Neal uncomfortable. Looking at Peter, she said, "Could it be worked out then?"

"I could call Diana and set it up. I think everyone will understand and make it work." said Peter, sitting on the couch next to Neal. Noticing Neal staring at his hands, he offers up a change of topic. "So anything good on TV today?" he said, texting Diana and Hughes the idea.

"Not sure." said Neal, looking up. "I'm sure you could find a game." He can't help but yawn, wanting to curse at himself when his ribs protested. "Would anyone mind if I took a nap?"

"That's probably a good idea. The doctor said you should rest as much as possible." said El, helping Neal to lie down on the couch as Peter moved to a chair near the TV. "Would the TV keep you awake? Peter can live without a game if so." She gives Peter a look, who shrugs.

"No, it's fine. I can sleep through pretty much anything." said Neal, trying to relax with his injuries. As if to read his mind, El uses a pillow to try to cushion his arm. "Oh, that's perfect, thank you. Wait has anyone heard from June?"

"Yeah, she has called to check on you and magically keeps hitting when you are asleep." said Peter with a laugh, flipping through the channels until he settles on a game. Turning more serious, "Honestly considering what's going on, I asked her to stay put for now. Keep her out of any danger. I know you probably miss her and I know she misses you, but it's for the best right now."

"No, you're right." said Neal, nodding as he closed his eyes. "I was actually thinking similar...though I would like to call her later."

"I still have the newest burner phone Mozzie gave me." said El. "You can use it later."

"Thanks El." said Neal, further dozing off, listening to the game Peter had found and wondering about things between him and Mozzie. While he had never given a thought about giving up the life before, he had been truthful in what he said to Mozzie. He fell asleep hoping Mozzie would
eventually come to understand.
Chapter 20

After lunch, Neal borrows the burner phone Mozzie had given her, though knowing he wouldn't be able to use it to contact June more than a few times without having to worry about someone eventually tracing it if they were able to trace June's calls. He trusted this phone to be clean and June normally kept hers clean as well, but it was better to be safer than sorry - he had learned that the hard way during his run from Peter. Both Burke's had managed to make themselves scarce to give him privacy, both coming up with errands around the house they had been meaning to do. Both had been far too obvious. He laughs, cursing his ribs, and dials June's cell phone number. After a couple rings, June answers.

"Hey Neal!" said June, just knowing when she saw the unknown number it would have to be Neal, especially as El said she would have him call soon. "How are you doing, sweetie? I mean considering."

"Oh you know me, seeing how exciting I can keep things and what trouble I can find." joked Neal. "Honestly though, keeping out of trouble for the most part if we're being serious...enjoying a vacation at casa de Burke."

"I'm really sorry I haven't been to see you. I am only afraid things would go bad if I came and Agent Peter seems to agree." said June, feeling torn. "Though a change in routine can be good."

"I fully understand and I agree with you both." said Neal. "How's Samantha? I heard there were complications?"

"Oh it was just a minor thing and she's fine." said June. "Now keeping her in bed resting instead of running around and wanting to go back to soccer is a challenge. I'm glad I brought Bugsy as he is helping to distract her."

"I'm glad to hear everything turned out well for Samantha. She's been in all of our minds." said Neal, "How are you as well?"

"Oh you know me, I'm fine." said June, with a light laugh. "I'm missing being in on you and Mozzie's schemes though. You guys bring such fun to my life."

"Yeah, we keep things from being quiet." said Neal, changing position a bit on the couch and not resisting a small grunt of pain.

"Oh Neal, you should be resting." said June, feeling the maternal instinct she often had towards Neal. "I should go anyways as I promised Cindy I would go to an art gallery with her in awhile. There's none as nice as the ones in the city, but it still can be fun."

"Enjoy it extra for me." said Neal, missing the times he could enter any art gallery he wanted. "This number should be good for awhile if you want to call. Give Samantha a hug for me later? And tell Cindy I say hi?"

"I will on all of those. Bye Neal, hun." said June before hanging up. She thinks for a second and sends Neal the photo taken yesterday of Samantha with Cindy and herself as proof they are okay.

Neal looked at the phone hearing the chime, happy to know things on that end were well. June had been so kind to him since he got out of prison and he didn't want anything bad to happen to her. Hopefully Peter would catch Keetes soon and Neal wished he could go more to help with the case. Opening one of the art books El had laid out for him to peruse, he decided to lose himself in the
world of art for a little while as he needed the distraction.
Chapter 21

Sitting at the dining table a little later, Neal still couldn't believe he had volunteered to look over the case files for other cases Peter was working on. He had offered last night, but had figured El would take him up on helping with dinner. He sipped at the water, wishing it was wine instead, but knew Peter and El would both refuse considering he was medication. Sighing and flipping the page, making notes as he went along, he continued reading the file.

"Coming closer than I did?" asked Peter, flipping through his own file, glancing up at Neal.

"I have a working theory, but yeah nothing solid." said Neal, explaining what he had seen so far. "Just not sure why the clerk would steal from his workplace for his girlfriend." Peter gives him a look. "What's that look?" asked Neal looking at Peter.

Peter sighed, laughing, knowing Neal had pulled a lot of his cons and stolen a lot of things for Kate, but would never admit up to it. "You know why, Neal, probably better than I do." said Peter, rolling his eyes.

"I absolutely never stole from a jewelry hut in a mall where I was employed, Peter." said Neal, choosing his words carefully as to avoid a lie as he had from an actual jewelry store. "Too risky, too many people."

"Alright boys, time for a break." said El, laughing and walking to the dining table with Chinese food she had ordered as she had been busy with work related stuff as well. Giving Peter time to clear the table, she got plates and chopsticks, grabbing a fork in case anyone wanted one. Sitting the plates on the newly cleared table, she passed the food around and lets everyone take what they want.

During dinner, Neal and Peter talk about the cases they had looked at and El discusses her recent client, everyone trying to avoid the subject of the next day. El chooses to break up the case talk with more about the time Peter had a mustache and promising to pull out other photos she had of it the next day, despite desperate looks from Peter.

After the table was cleared, El asked, "Anyone watch a movie? Just figured it would be something different."

"Sounds good." uttered both Peter and Neal, El laughing. They agree on a movie El wants to watch and halfway through the movie, El notices Peter is lost in thoughts sitting next to her and Neal is lost drawing in a sketchpad that had been picked up from June's. She almost wishes to see what he's drawing, but is unable to as he is sitting facing them in the armchair. As the movie ends, she offers to walk Satchmo as Peter helps Neal up the stairs.

"So about tomorrow..." said Neal, grunting the last few steps. "Who's all going to be there?"

"Well you know the drill. At least one FBI agent, the witness which is you, and well I would say you could have your lawyer there, but you had an argument with Mozzie." said Peter, sitting in the chair in the guest room as Neal sits on the bed. "As for the agent, it can be me or Jones or Diana...or someone else if you like. I'm sure whomever will make time."

"I want you there." said Neal, knowing at least if Peter was there it was less times he would have to recount the event. "And either Diana or Jones is fine. I figure someone could claim you are too close to the case considering I'm your consultant."
"Good point." said Peter, already having figured he would have to tell Neal that, but he wasn't sure Neal would choose for him to be there anyways. "You got the rest or need any help?"

"I got it." said Neal, waving Peter out of the room. "I'm probably going to go right to sleep." Peter leaves and while Neal does carefully lay back on the bed, he finds himself having trouble sleeping thinking about the next morning.
Chapter 22

Neal sips at the coffee Diana had brought him and everyone else who was going to be in the room, knowing she had to be feeling sorry for him to bring him coffee - especially coffee from outside the office. Even more so as he hadn't even had coffee since before everything happened. He watched Peter and Diana finish setting up the equipment.

"Are you ready or do you need a few more minutes?" asked Peter, sitting down to the left of him at a table. It would leave Diana to sit to the right and neither would have to be looking Neal right in the face. The camera would be catching that angle anyways and he was trying to make it the easiest possible on Neal.

"Let's just do this." said Neal with a sigh.

"Okay." said Diana, having already agreed to lead the questions. "Let's start off with your full name for the record."

"Neal George Caffrey." said Neal, perfunctory.

"Your age at the time of this interview?" asked Diana.

"32 years old." answered Neal. Peter couldn't help but ask himself if it was true, but he didn't think even Neal would lie during this. At least the age Neal stated is what matched the files the FBI had on him.

"So why don't you just state what happened?" said Diana. "Start at the beginning. If I have questions, I'll ask them at the end. Sound good?" Peter nodded in agreement at Neal.

"I was walking home from the office. I was almost to June's when I got jumped. I had a hood or something thrown over my head and I was pulled back into what I believe was a van. I was then tased." said Neal starting the story. "Next thing I knew I woke up in some sort of basement." He stopped to sip some water and regain some composure. Peter could remember that day - he had gotten angry with Neal about pushing for an extension to his radius to go to a museum outside his radius and they had bickered and he had told Neal to walk home. He doubted he would ever stop feeling guilty about that.

"I am not sure how long I was held there honestly. I want to think a couple days considering they delivered a bit of food and water. Then I was moved again." Neal continued with the story. "At the next location I was told to make some forgeries. I tried to hide my initials in a few and I guess they were looking for them as I was knocked out by one of the guys and that's when I woke up in the basement Peter found me in." Neal paused again to sip the coffee and then a sip out of the glass of water in front of him. Both Diana and Peter could see Neal's hands tremble, but they both chose to ignore it since Neal hated people seeing him without his typical mask.

"I was there awhile before Keetes showed up, possibly days with the same routine as before." said Neal. "After Keetes showed up, he made it well known while he was there - to take out a rat and a snitch like me. I had recently tried to escape before the last move, so I got paid back with a beating and him being sure to break enough bones to keep me from even trying to escape again." Neal could feel his eyes watering up from the memory, but pushed the pain back to continue. "He said he was going to make the process as painful as possible. Again I was left alone for a couple days, this time with no food or water. You...Peter...found me before he returned. That's all of it."
Both Peter and Diana both found it hard to keep up composure after hearing the story. Diana swallowed hard before asking. "You were able to sketch two of them in the hospital. They didn't wear masks?"

"No, not at any point after I woke up the first time." said Neal, quietly. "I took it then as I wouldn't be leaving alive if they could help it."

Diana continued on with a few more questions, Neal growing less responsive. Peter finally waved at Diana, who nodded. "I think we got enough. Thank you Neal." She shuts off the recording equipment. "You and Peter can go now, if you want."

"Thanks Diana." said Peter to Diana when Neal didn't respond and she left the room with the equipment after packing it up. "Hey Neal, let's go home." Neal only nodded at Peter and they quietly walked out of the building and back to the car.
Peter glances at Neal as they drive home. Neal being super quiet was actually scaring him a bit. "Neal?" he asked, putting on his turn signal as he drove up to a light. "Neal?" He looked back over at his friend staring at his hands. Patting Neal's shoulder, he tries again, "Neal, buddy, you there?"

Neal looks up as surprised he's in the car. "Hmm." said Neal, looking around seeming a bit confused. "Something wrong?"

"Just wondering if you're still with me over there. You make me far too nervous when you are that quiet." said Peter, turning and taking a quick glance at Neal before looking back at the road.

"I'm sorry Peter." said Neal, in a low voice. "Just off in my mind. You know how it is."

"I get it and if you ever need to talk, you know I'm around, right?" said Peter, alternating between watching the road and looking at Neal, who nodded. At some point he would have to tell Neal he would be seeing a therapist before he could return to work, but figured it could wait awhile as Neal was too out of it. "I'm here for you, Neal."

"I know, Peter." said Neal, thinking. "I'm just thinking about my life and things I have done."

"Wanting to confess to any crimes?" said Peter jokingly, hoping to get a bit of the regular Neal to show. "I'm sure a few museums would love to get some art back."

"Yeah, no, not confessing to anything that will get me more time." said Neal with a bit of his old laugh. "More just thinking about all the stuff I did and maybe why."

"Neal, you don't sound like yourself. Are you okay?" said Peter, pulling the car over next to a park. "Seriously, just talk to me." He removes his badge and ID from his pocket and lays it in Neal's lap. "Totally off the record for as long as you need to talk."

Neal plays with the badge for a moment. "What if I said I wasn't sure I still want my old life...I mean the cons and such." Neal said quietly, so low Peter could barely hear him. "Just with everything now I can't help but think about it."

Peter is stunned and isn't sure what to say. "I assume you are feeling regrets." said Peter. "You do know, no matter what you've done, you didn't deserve what happened, right?"

"Yeah I guess." said Neal. "But something I've done along with turning sides ticked someone off. You won't believe me, but I don't know, lately I keep thinking about what it would be like if I went straight. No dark side as Mozzie would put it."

"Well I think it would be easier in a lot of ways." said Peter, hating playing armchair psychologist. "Though I am not stupid and know it would likely also be hard. That's something you have to decide Neal, and a choice you have to make. I know you are a good man and I do have faith in you even if it seems like I don't sometimes." Thinking for a moment, "Neal I'm sorry about that day."

"I don't blame you Peter." said Neal, looking up at Peter, looking him straight in the eyes. "I never did for a moment. Maybe wished for you to find me quite a few times, but no blame. So don't blame yourself."

"But if I had only..." started Peter.
"Don't Peter, okay?" said Neal. "I don't want you to."

"Okay." said Peter, quietly, knowing he was lying to his friend. He would likely never be able to completely forgive himself. He couldn't help but think about all of what else Neal had said. He would be thrilled if Neal went straight and while he wanted to hear more about it, he decided not to push it. "How about I text El that we'll pick up some lunch and head home?"

"Sounds good Peter." said Neal as Peter texts El. "Can we just go home?" Peter nods as he puts his phone away and starts the rest of the drive back.
"Hun, we're home with lunch." said Peter, carrying a large paper bag with one hand and helping Neal walk in with the other.

El walks over and takes the bag to carry to the dining table, figuring Peter had enough with Neal. "Hey boys." she said. "I already sat out plates as I got home before you two."

"Thanks Hun." said Peter as both him and Neal took a seat at the table. "Hope calzones were okay...just sounded good. I got salads too." He added the last part, knowing El liked for him to eat healthier.

"It sounds fine." said El, noticing Neal hadn't said a word and was essentially just staring at the table, absentmindedly petting Satchmo. She gestures at Peter as to say 'Is he okay?' Peter just shrugs as to say 'he's been like this the way home'. "Neal sweetie, what would you like to drink?" asked El in a little louder voice, hoping to elicit a response from him.

"Anything El." said Neal, snapping back to what's going on and smiling at El. "I'm not sure of my options."

"Water, iced tea, hot tea, juice...it's really up to you." said El, sitting down glasses as Peter unpacked the bag, placing food on each of the plates.

"Iced tea please then." said Neal. "Or whatever is easiest."

"It's all the same." said El, filling three glasses with tea and bringing them over. "I'm starved, how about you two?" She sits down at the table and looks between Peter and Neal.

"You know me, I can always eat." said Peter with a laugh and biting into his calzone. El starts to eat too and he notices Neal has went back to staring, this time just at his plate. "Neal, please eat too. Then something for pain if you need as well."

"Sure Peter." said Neal quietly still lost in his own little world, slowly and obediently getting a forkful of salad and eating it. Trying to maintain his usual grace, "So how was this morning for you El? I remember you had to check some deliveries?"

El describes her morning as the trio eats their lunch and El hands Neal a pain pill, which he swallows without argument. "So what are you two up to this afternoon?" she asked.

"Would anyone mind if I just went upstairs and laid down for a bit?" said Neal, looking back and forth between the Burke's.

"No, you should rest if you feel like it." said El as Peter stood up to help Neal up the stairs. "I'll let you know when it's dinner if you want to take a nap?" Neal nodded as him and Peter made their way up the stairs. A few minutes later, Peter came back down the stairs.

"Okay honestly, is he okay?" said El, worried. "I mean he's never that quiet. I know you probably can't or shouldn't tell me about what was said, but anything I can know?"

Peter filled her in on what was said in the car. "I mean normally I'd never believe Neal Caffrey on something like that." said Peter. "But considering..." He gestures at the stairs. "He's never like that."
"I know, that's what is worrying me." said El, thinking about what Peter told her. "It's a good thing if he wants to change, just hope he's okay as well. I'd call Moz and talk to him, but I don't think it will do any good."

Peter nods in agreement. "Let's just take it slowly and see how he is later." he said, sitting on the couch with his wife. "I'm worried about him too."
Chapter 25

Neal laid in bed in the guest room staring at the ceiling. He thought about his statement earlier and hoped Peter wouldn't see him as broken now...though he had been worried about that since he had woken up at the hospital. And he wasn't even sure if Peter would believe anything he said after either. He also can't help but wonder if Peter would tell El what happened as well. He's still thinking as he hears a knock on the door. "Come in." he calls out to whomever it is.

El quietly opens the door. "Hey Neal. How are you feeling?" she asked, sitting on the edge of the bed, sitting something out of sight. "Dinner will be ready in a bit, have a good nap?"

Neal shrugs his shoulders and regrets it as his ribs remind him of their injuries. "I didn't end up falling asleep, just ended up laying up here." he said, being honest. "It's just been a long day and as much as I hate doing nothing, well it's actually been fun for once." He tries to sit up and can't quite hide the grimace.

"How about I bring dinner up here tonight?" said El, standing. "Then you can get some more rest. There's even a TV up here." She opens a small armoire in the corner that Neal somehow hadn't paid much attention to. "Not a large TV, but at least you could get more rest. You are welcome downstairs, but going up and down the stairs has to hurt."

"I don't want to make you do that though." said Neal, though the idea sounded great with the pain. "I don't want to make you carry a heavy tray up the stairs and everything. I know I'm already adding more work for you by being around."

"How about I make Peter bring the tray up?" said El, patting Neal on the shoulder. "And it's not a problem. I even did some of your laundry while you was asleep. It's on the dresser." She points to a clothes basket. As if reading Neal's mind, "Don't worry, Peter didn't tell me anything. I even told him not to and that it was up to you to tell me if you wanted." She can't help but see Neal visibly relax.

"Thanks El." said Neal, feeling very grateful to his partner's wife. He wondered how Peter found someone so understanding...Kate had never been anywhere near that understanding. "You're too good to me, you know?"

"Maybe." said El laughing. "Honestly Neal, it's nice having you here. I know Peter worries less and well so do I."

"Worried about me getting into trouble or causing trouble?" joked Neal.

"Why can't it be both?" said El laughing. "But probably the first more, especially now considering. Anyways, I'll leave you alone and send Peter up with a tray in a bit." She tosses the remote to the TV where Neal can reach it. Picking up the books she had sat by the bed, "I also brought you some reading materials. I noticed you had flipped through the books on the coffee table and figured you might want something different to read."

Neal looks and notices a couple different art books and a few paperbacks. "Thanks El," he said, managing to give El one of his infamous smiles. As El leaves, he picks up the remote and flips on the TV and settles on a show about antiques. He wonders just how much Peter would hate it as he reaches for his sketchpad to complete the drawing he had been working on. It was a drawing of Peter, El, and Satchmo and he planned to let El have it when it was done if she wanted it.
A few minutes after El leaves, there's another knock on the door. Luckily Neal had managed to get himself into a more seated position - though his ribs had hugely protested - as he hated having to always rely on help. "Come in Peter." he said, quickly stashing the sketchbook.

Peter walks in with the tray El had mentioned. "How'd you know it was me and not El again?" said Peter, sitting the tray on the bed. "And I'm still shocked she talked you into actually resting more."

"She drives a hard bargain." said Neal, pointing at the books and TV. "Honestly, it's been a long day and I'll just confess I'm tired to make it easy on you. El said you would be up in a bit, so it made sense you would be the one at the door. And what smells so delicious?"

"El made her famous lasagna." said Peter, removing the cloche from the plate, revealing an extra large serving of it. "Also salad and garlic bread. And peach galette for dessert." He had a feeling El was trying to add some weight to Neal as he had lost too much while missing, but he decided not to say his thoughts.

"Looks as delicious as it smells." said Neal. "Thanks for bringing it up, Peter."

"It's not a problem. If you need anything else, just ask." said Peter. "I'll be back in awhile for the tray, so don't even think about trying to bring it down on those stairs with your leg." Neal gave him a 'who me?' look. "We both know you're stubborn enough to try it." With that said, he walks downstairs leaving Neal to enjoy his dinner in peace.

"How's he doing?" said El, finishing setting the table downstairs. "I mean you always say you can read him better than anyone else."

"And he's more honest with you, interestingly enough." said Peter, sitting down. "But I think he's dealing and well he does tend to go more quiet when so. I can't say it's not making me worry as it's usually better when he has stuff to do, but on the flip he also deserves some rest." He takes a bite of the lasagna. "Hm, delicious, Hun."

"I know it's one dish you and Neal both love." said El, with a laugh, knowing her husband's very simple tastes. "So I was able to please you both with it. I just hope he'll be okay since having to recount everything that happened in front of you and Diana had to be hard."

"I think he wanted me to be there so he wouldn't have to recount it twice." said Peter, taking a sip of his beer, still blaming himself. "And without telling, I mean, it all happened the day me and him got into an argument."

"Isn't that most days?" said El, with a slight chuckle. "He has a tendency of getting on your nerves sometimes." She had to confess half the time she found what Neal did to be funny.

"True, but if I had only taken him home, El." said Peter, sounding guilty. "Then he wouldn't have had to go through any of what happened." El hadn't pushed to know and he figured it was up to Neal if he wanted El to know.

"Peter, there's no way you could have foreseen it." said El, patting her husband's shoulder and sipping at her wine. "I doubt Neal blame you either, so you shouldn't feel so guilty."

"That's pretty much what Neal said." said Peter, sounding even more guilty. "He's too good of a man to even blame me, El. What does that even say about me?"
"Hun, you two will get through this." said El, "And he doesn't want you to go the rest of your life blaming yourself if he said he doesn't blame you. You didn't do that to him." She gives Peter a hug. "Don't forget you're a good man yourself, Peter Burke, and me, Neal, and everyone else knows that."

"It's my duty to keep him safe, El, it's part of the deal." said Peter, playing with his fork and his food. "And I failed."

"And you will from now on." said El. "Even if you have to move him into the guest room permanently. Now eat your dinner, we watch a little TV, and you can check on Neal before bed. You have a good excuse with the tray anyways."

"Good point." said Peter, feeling a little more relieved with El's words. He knew he would definitely have to make this all up to Neal even if Neal didn't blame him, though he did still feel guilty. He takes a bite of food and swallows it. "Good lasagna as always."

El smiles at Peter, worried about Neal herself and the couple eats their dinner. She sends Peter to the living room to catch a bit of a game while she cleans up, letting the process keep her mind busy. She finishes up, lets Satchmo out and back in, and curls up with a book next to Peter, just happy they are both safe and at home and that Neal is safe upstairs. Maybe it wasn't much, but it was enough for now.

An hour later, Peter flips off the TV and stretches. "I think I'll go fetch the tray." he said before heading up the stairs. Knocking on the guest door and not getting a response, he opens the door to find Neal asleep sitting up. It doesn't take more than a few seconds to realize Neal had likely not easily been able to move out of the position he was in. He moves the sketchpad off of Neal's lap, getting a glimpse of the sketch Neal had been working on and smiles before closing the pad and sitting it on the nightstand. Neal wakes with a starts as the pad is moved.

"Hey Peter." said Neal sounding apologetic. "Sorry I think I fell asleep." He stretches and grimaces. "I keep forgetting moving is bad."

"It's fine, it's been a long day. You need rest." said Peter, adjusting the pillows behind Neal so he can easily slide down into the bed, knowing Neal would likely stay in that position than ask for help. Neal could be way too stubborn. "I just needed to pick up the tray. I brought up a pain pill in case you wanted it...it's on the nightstand. Need help with anything before I go?"

"No I got it." said Neal, realizing he had fallen asleep with the TV on and finds the remote in the bed and flips it off. Barely even thinking on it, he swallows the pain pill on the nightstand as his ribs protest movement. "Think I will just go back to sleep though."

"Sounds like a good plan." said Peter, happy to see Neal not argue on the meds. "I'll leave you be. Goodnight Neal."

"Goodnight Peter." said Neal, as Peter left with the tray, passing El who had come up to get ready for bed. She peaks in and says goodnight before heading to the master bedroom as Peter takes the tray downstairs, unloads the dishes into the dishwasher, starts it, and walks back upstairs to bed.
Chapter 28

El wakes up in the middle of the night with a start, hearing screams from the guest room. "Peter," she said, trying to wake Peter, "Peter, wake up."

"Huh?" said Peter, sleepily. Hearing the next shout, he sits up. "What's going on?"

"I think Neal's having a nightmare." said El, already sitting up in bed. "Should one of us check on him?"

"I should do it." said Peter, slowly getting out of bed.

"Wait, mind if I go instead?" said El, getting up and pulling a robe around her. "I'd just lie here and worry if not." Noticing a look from Peter, "I'll be fine walking down the hallway." She rolls her eyes and walks down the hall and knocks on the guest bedroom door before entering, figuring the knocking wasn't likely to wake Neal.

"No, please, don't." mumbles Neal in a shout, clearly having a nightmare. The scream that follows breaks El's heart and she walks forward and nudges Neal.

"Hey, Neal, sweetie, wake up." said El, pushing a little harder when he doesn't wake up. "Hey, it's okay, wake up."

Neal finally wakes, looking relieved as he looks around. "Oh, I'm sorry El, I must have woken you guys." he said, bracing himself up a bit with his good arm.

"Don't worry about it. It's all okay." said El, shushing Neal as she sits on the edge of the bed. "Want to talk about it?"

"Not particularly." said Neal with a groan, as he had been dreaming about being back with Keetes and his men. "Just bad recent memories." Neal notices the glass of water that had been on the nightstand was now the ground, luckily unbroken. "I'm really sorry about that, I'll get it." He starts to get up.

"Neal, it's fine, lay down please. I'll grab a towel." said El, leaving momentarily to grab a towel and comes back to dry the spot on the ground. "It's not a big deal, just an accident. And just remember I'm around if you need to talk, okay?" She finishes drying the area as best as possible. "The rest should dry by morning."

"I'm just so sorry about everything." said Neal, trying not to cry. "Everything is all my fault."

"Neal, everything is okay." said El, hugging Neal, knowing Neal likely was apologizing for other things than a spilled glass of water. "No one's mad at you, okay?" She stays and comforts Neal a little longer, just holding on to him until Neal relaxes. "How about you go back to sleep?" She notices Neal is back to sleep and scoots out from under him. She refills the glass, sits a dry towel in the area in case it gets spilled again, and goes back to the master bedroom.

"Is everything okay? You were gone for awhile." said Peter, flipping through a magazine by the bed. "I thought about getting up and checking, but I figured you'd ask for my help if needed."

El chooses to leave out Neal's moments without his usual mask. "It's all okay. Neal just had a nightmare. I bet today's statement just brought it all way too fresh into his mind." said El, removing her robe and getting back into bed. "I just wanted to make sure he got back to sleep."
"Did I ever tell you that you're perfect and smart?" said Peter, cuddling up next to his wife after turning off the light next to him.

"Yes, but you're welcome to say it again, Peter Burke." said El with a small laugh. "We probably should get some sleep though." Peter rolls over and falls asleep as she lays lost in thought worried about Neal.
The rest of the night Neal is plagued by nightmares. Peter gets El to agree to stay in bed and ends up just sleeping in the chair in the guest room to gently nudge Neal to half-awake before making himself comfortable in the guest chair again. He wakes with a start, realizing at some point they both must have finally fallen asleep. He looks around and doesn't see Neal. He walks by the master bedroom and spies El still in bed and notices the bathroom door is shut. Knocking on the bathroom door, he said, "Neal, you in there?" Hearing something drop, he knocks again, "Neal, you okay?"

"Yeah, yeah. Stupid washcloth, stupid cup." said Neal, muttering from behind the door. "Just trying to shave and get as clean as possible considering the casts and everything. Just give me ten more minutes."

Peter walks back to the bedroom and guiltily wakes El. "Morning Hun." he said, gently nudging El. "Hey." said El, sitting up and yawning. "How did the rest of the night go?"

"About as well as to be expected. I'm considering calling Dr Rogers to see if he can prescribe anything in case the nightmares continue. Something to help Neal sleep...and selfishly, us as well." said Peter, sitting on the edge of the bed. "Neal's in the bathroom. I'm thinking it's a good morning for cereal for breakfast, which I can set up and you can have first dibs at the bathroom. If you notice him trying to take those stairs, yell for me?"

"Can do, Peter Burke." said El, giving Peter a fake salute and giggling. "Sorry think I am a little loopy from not sleeping well."

Peter laughs. "Well you are working from home today. Maybe later we can all get in a nap." he said, getting up and slipping into a pair of jeans and a t-shirt. "We could all use the sleep."

Peter heads down the stairs and sets up breakfast in between letting Satchmo out and leaving a voicemail for Dr Rogers. He hears El talking to someone and heads back up the stairs. "Hey Neal." he said, "What's going on you two?"

Neal and El exchange looks. "I was just debating coming down and getting breakfast and just spending some more time alone in the guest room." said Neal, looking at El.

"And you were going to carry it up the stairs how?" said El, trying not to laugh. "If you want to stay up here and relax, go ahead. I will bring up some breakfast."

"I hate being a bother to you two. You are already both being too nice." said Neal, with a shrug. "And I'm sure I can figure out a way."

"I have no doubts you would try." said Peter, "But El is right, we can bring up some food. I get it if you want to relax as you don't look like you slept well." He chooses not to mention the nightmares, but the look on Neal's face gives away he already figures they both know.

"Fine, fine." said Neal, heading back towards the guest room. "But I could have done it."

Peter and El walk downstairs. "He's so stubborn." said Peter, chuckling a little.

"It's the very essence of Neal and you like it about him." said El. "It helps with the cases."

"He should know neither of us want him to get more hurt." said Peter, setting up a tray with a bowl
of cereal, some fruit he had managed to slice up earlier, a cup of hot tea, and a glass of juice.

"I kind of get the feeling he's had to do a lot on his own, Peter, and he's just too used to being self-reliant." said El, giving Peter a kiss. "I'll take this tray up. You got less sleep than me." El heads up the stairs with the tray as Peter sits at the table, shaking his head thinking of Neal and wondering more about Neal's past. The FBI had never been able to find out much, but Peter had always made guesses Neal's childhood probably wasn't the greatest. Still thinking, he chooses to start eating his breakfast, hoping one day to know more about his partner.
"Hey El." said Neal. He had just finished changing into clean clothes when El knocked on the door. He had tried to comfortably get seated on the bed, though he had given up on actual comfortable and had settled for not being in active pain. "See, now I really feel bad. I swear I could have gotten it all myself...somehow."

"I am sure you would have, sweetie." said El, sitting down the tray and trying not to laugh imagining some of the stunts Neal might have tried. She couldn't help, but imagine it would likely have something to do with a tie. "You do know Peter and I really don't mind helping you, right? We wouldn't have you here if we didn't want you here, Neal."

"I am pretty sure Dr Rogers orders essentially required me to be with someone." said Neal. "But I mean I feel like a burden here, especially with everything that happened. I tried to talk Peter into letting me go back to June's."

"Neal, trust me that both of us wanted you to come here when you got released from the hospital." said El, finding herself sounding more stern. "And yes the doctor wanted someone with you, but I think we all know you got released a little early and we could have simply had you stay at the hospital longer. So please stop feeling bad about being here, okay?"

"Fine, El." said Neal, forfeiting for the time being. "Thanks for bringing this up though." He pauses for a moment. "I have a feeling I kept you two up last night too and I am sorry for that as well."

"We'll survive and it's not been my first sleepless night." said El, sitting on the edge of the bed. She decides not to put it on Neal the guilt that Peter had stayed up most of the night to make sure Neal was okay.

"Oh yeah, that was because of me two." said Neal, eating a small bite of cereal. "Again I'm sorry."

"All the nights weren't because of you. Peter's always had a habit of working late and losing track of time and that's not counting stake-outs." said El, laughing a little. "I've just gotten used to it, though I admit I don't sleep as well when he's not home." She hopes adding the last bit might help Neal trust her a little more.

"I have to say, you two are the best couple." said Neal. El gets up and starts to leave. "Hey El?"

"Yeah?" said El, turning around.

"I want you to know what happened, but I don't want to talk about it." said Neal, being honest. "I know the whole thing was taped. Tell Peter I said to let you see it if and when he can. Just do me a favor and don't use it to feel sorry for me, okay?"

"Neal, I don't want you to feel forced into anything." said El. "And I'm not sure I can promise the second, but I can try not to show it if you want me to see it."

"I really do want you to know, El, if you think you can handle it." said Neal. "Send Peter up and I'll tell him if he doesn't believe you."

"Will do. Eat your breakfast and just relax. One of us will get the tray later. I also brought up a pain pill as well." said El. "Just yell if you need anything or if you want to come downstairs as Peter should help you." She leaves, shutting the door and leaning against it a moment. With a deep
breath, she walks down the stairs to tell Peter what Neal had said, hoping she would be able to sit through it as the curiosity in her always got the better of her.
"Are you sure you want to do this?" asked Peter. He had set up the laptop with the jump drive containing the official record of what had happened at the table. They had cleared the table of breakfast dishes and had talked for awhile about it. "I mean I am okay with you seeing it since Neal is, but I mean it's not exactly a fun watch and I don't want any of it to scare you."

"I can handle it." said El, being unsure of exactly that, but wanting to know what Neal and Peter are both dealing with. "I promise I will be fine, Peter, just hit play." She adjusts the headphones as neither wanted Neal to accidentally hear it upstairs and have to listen to it. She braces herself as she hears Neal recite his name.

A little while later, El sits down the headphones and wipes some tears from her eyes. It had been much harder than she had even expected to sit through the whole thing and watch Neal's face on the video. She felt herself grow furious about Keetes - especially with what Peter had leaked about who Keetes does - and couldn't resist wishing him dead.

"You okay hun?" asked Peter, putting his arm around his wife.

"Yeah, I'll be fine." said El, unsure if she will ever forget anything she heard. "I really hope you catch this guy and nail him to the damn wall though. He deserves it after what I heard there."

"I agree." said Peter. "I want Keetes in prison permanently...and I have no plans to drop this case until that happens."

"Poor Neal, really." said El. "While no one is a fan of having FBI agents outside their home 24/7, I am glad he's here and we're all together."

"I am too. I can't help but worry...to the extent I have set Neal's anklet to alert if he even leaves the house." said Peter. "I didn't tell him as well I didn't want him to think I didn't trust him, though I wouldn't be totally shocked if he figured out a way to break out out of boredom if nothing else. At least this way I can sleep at night."

"Peter, you flatter me." said Neal, carefully walking up to the table and noticing the laptop. "I take it that means what I think it does?"

"Neal, how the hell did you make it down the stairs?" asked Peter, a little furious considering Neal's injuries. "You could have asked for help."

"I got bored and you know I like mystery." said Neal with a shrug. Truth was halfway down the stairs, he had been tempted to turn around and go back from pain, but it would have been as painful to walk back up as come back down. Sitting and scooting down on his butt had seriously made his ribs feel like he was dying. "Trust me, no plans to try it again." He sat down with a grimace. "You didn't answer my question though."

"It does." said El, clearing the table of the laptop and putting it on her desk in the kitchen, handing Peter the jump drive. "So hopefully you at least learned your lesson in needing help on the stairs?"

"I promise El, I won't try it again until at least my ribs are healed." said Neal.

"Then you got about 4 weeks to wait." said Peter, patting Neal's shoulder. While he wanted to lecture Neal, he could see Neal was in enough pain and had learned the lesson better than Peter lecturing him would have. "And that's for the ribs. Your arm should take similar, but you likely 3+
months with the leg. So you might as well get used to it."

"Hey, at least I didn't try to bring the tray down with me." said Neal, jokingly, though he had considered it momentarily upstairs.

"At least let me help you to the couch." said Peter. He gets Neal settled on the couch, wondering why Neal has to be so damn stubborn. He sits down next to him. "And how much did you overhear?"

"Some, mostly about the anklet, though I'm not sure I care considering I doubt I could walk a full block." said Neal, sounding a little sad. "What did Hughes think?"

"Since we're doing the honest thing, Hughes wanted you in Witness Protection." said Peter. He spies the annoyed look on Neal's face. "Yeah, I knew you wouldn't want it either and really with Keetes background, likely all three of us would need to go at least. And I really want to catch this guy."

"I have to ask, how much more time off are the marshals going to give me before they want me in lock-up." said Neal, looking Peter straight in the eyes. "I'm not an idiot, I know the deal only works if I'm actually working and I haven't in almost three weeks."

"You're right. Hughes has pushed for more time and we have another week until he has to show you are at least doing something...and admittedly I'm almost out of vacation time, though Hughes would overlook that." said Peter. "Though the plan is for Diana or Jones to drop off cases for us to both work on from home and collect them each morning. Hughes was able to calm them down with that, though I doubt they are fully happy. Are you up to working on cases again? I know you hate desk duty, which this essentially is, but you have to admit my house is nicer than your desk at work." He had to admit he worried about putting his partner back to work again, but Neal had been helping with some cold cases Peter had collected for busy work for himself.

"I am not the type to enjoy daytime TV forever and I've done enough reading and sketching lately to fill a gallery." said Neal. "I'd be ready to start on cases immediately...or at least tomorrow. I would rather be useful than lie in bed, Peter, and you know that."

Peter gives Neal a long look before agreeing. "Okay, I'll let Hughes know. We might as well enjoy the weekend first however." said Peter. "What's just two more days at this point?" He gives Neal a pat on the shoulder and flips on the TV, still worried about Neal being pushed back into work.

"I made some sandwiches. It's about lunchtime and figured you two were probably hungry." said El, handing each man a plate. All three sit and eat their lunch, both Burke's worrying about Neal and Neal lost in thought about everything Peter had said. He ends up drifting off on the couch after lunch.
Chapter 32

Neal woke up, finding himself lying on the couch covered with a blanket. He supposed Peter or El one had situated him so he could rest easier. He couldn't help but think he should almost be upset to be moved around while sleeping, but he trusted Peter and El both. Instinctively, he chose to pretend to be sleeping to know what was going on around him without anyone knowing he was listening.

"I wish he would open up more." said Peter, talking to who Neal figured was El. "Even if it was just to tell me one or two things. It would at least be a start."

"I know, Peter." said El. Neal could tell their voices were both coming from the dining room and he couldn't resist a quick peek, hoping neither would notice him. He spies them both looking deep in conversation. He closes his eyes and continues to pretend to be asleep. "I think he will in time, just you got to be patient. I know he trusts you, but it may take letting him build up more trust. I'm still going with he likely had a rough childhood."

"You're probably right." said Peter, "There's just zero evidence of him before he was 18, so I can't look into it or anything." Neal had been careful of that and it almost made him laugh that as good of an agent as Peter was, he still hadn't uncovered any of it besides small hints Neal hadn't been able to resist giving, like not finishing high school. Neal wasn't even sure himself why he had said that.

"I know and one day you will find out or he'll tell you one." said El, Neal detecting her sounding sad by her tone. "Let you in and make it easier for you to help him."

Neal couldn't take it any longer and decided to stop pretending to be asleep. "Fine, I will give you both this much - you are both closer than you think to the truth. Let's go with both of my parents weren't really around and that's all I am saying for now." He manages to get himself into a seated position. "So what else is going on since I fell asleep?"

"Hey Neal." said El, looking towards Neal, wondering exactly how much he had overheard. Though she had always had a feeling, she still felt her heart break for a child Neal thinking about what he had just said.

"Not much, Neal, just working on some of those cold cases." said Peter, looking over at Neal. "And you do know that just gave me a billion more questions."

Neal nodded. "I assumed as much." he said, stretching a little, trying to be careful. "Sorry I keep falling asleep on you guys lately."

"Don't worry about it. I can't count the times I fall asleep on that couch." said Peter with a laugh. "Though El tends to leave me there if it's at night sometimes." He gives El a wink.

"What, maybe sometimes it's nice to get the whole bed to myself." said El with a shrug. "Need anything, sweetie?" She poses this question at Neal.

"I assume a nice glass of wine is out of the question, so hot tea if you wouldn't mind." said Neal, trying out the just asking for help that Peter and El were both always telling him to do.

"That I can do and I think I want a cup as well." said El, standing and walking into the kitchen and putting the electric kettle on. "Peter, how about you?"
"I'm good with my coffee. I like being tense." said Peter with a laugh. "I think the last time I had tea I was sick with the flu."

"That sounds about right." said El, getting out a couple mugs and tea bags. "Neal, how do you like your tea? Sugar, cream, honey?"

"I love it with a bit of honey." said Neal, wondering what to do. "Either of you need any help with anything?"

"You know, I would love some help." said El, pouring water in the two cups and leaving them to steep. She walks over to Neal with a binder. "I am trying to figure out a seating arrangement for two families that seem to hate each other. Want to work on it and see if you can figure out the best arrangement?"

"Sure." said Neal, the wheels in his head spinning. "Any other accommodations need to be made?"

"Yeah, the grandmother needs to be near the exit for bathroom breaks and the bride's MIL doesn't want to be anywhere near a speaker." said El, walking back with the cups of tea. "Plus the groom's sister wants to be seated near her parents, but they don't like her boyfriend. It's really a conundrum."

Peter watches El and Neal work on the seating arrangements for the wedding El is planning for a client along with talking tablescapes, letting himself wander to the bit of news Neal had given him. It definitely made a lot of sense with Neal's lack of impulse control. He also looked at the bag of sleeping pills Diana had collected for him from Dr Rogers and wondered how he would be able to talk Neal into trying one tonight.
Chapter 33

The rest of the weekend passed pretty uneventfully. Peter had been able to talk Neal into taking exactly one of the sleeping pills, but at least didn't seem to be having nightmares - at least not loud enough to wake anyone. Peter hoped they were gone for good, but he knew that was extremely naive.

"You know, you didn't have to dress up to work case files in the dining room." said Peter, looking at Neal as they got down the stairs. Neal had dressed in a pair of dress pants El had carefully removed the seams from the side until it reached knee length, promising they could be fixed to normal later on. Along with that, Neal had somehow managed to get a button-up shirt on and while it had to be rolled up past the cast, Neal had managed a tie and a cardigan. "Jeans and a shirt would have been perfectly acceptable."

"Oh Peter, you're no fun." said Neal, taking a seat at the dining table. Diana had dropped off some files along with a spare laptop for Neal to use in case it was needed. El had set up the table for them to use as a working space as she did have her desk. El had brought him breakfast up early since the space would be too full downstairs for eating. "I happen to like looking nice, thank you very much."

"Oh Peter, he looks nice." said El, giving Neal a wink as she sat a cup of decaffeinated coffee in front of him, thinking it was probably best considering. In fact, she had moved the regular coffee to another shelf and just had made decaf for everyone. "I made up some sandwiches and stuff for lunch so whenever anyone gets hungry, we can all take a break."

"Thank you El." said Neal, giving Peter a look. "And how do you have time to do so much?"

"I woke up early and couldn't sleep and decided to be productive." said El, as it was basically the truth. She had been having nightmares herself the last couple nights and waking an hour before the alarm had been a blessing. She had just chosen not to tell Neal as he would feel guilty and not to tell Peter as he had been resistant to let her hear the statement.

The next few hours passed relatively quietly, the only sounds were paper shuffling and the occasional sharing of notes of a file between Peter and Neal. Peter couldn't resist glancing up at Neal on occasion hoping Neal was handling everything well and did notice the shake of his hands occasionally. As if in pattern, Neal would occasionally give Peter a look of 'It's all fine.' El noticed the trend and had to stop herself from laughing at the two men.

Around noon everyone knocked off for a bit and had lunch in the living room - sandwiches and carrot sticks being on the menu.

"Oh I almost forgot, Dr Rogers called earlier when you were in the bathroom and confirmed your appointment for Wednesday, Neal." said Peter, biting into a deviled ham sandwich. Hearing Neal groan, "I know you hate doctors, but you do have to go."

"The only plus side is I'm hoping to be changed into a walking boot." said Neal. He noticed Peter giving him a look. "I've done a little research in the past and technically it's been over three weeks since I broke it and it's a possibility. It would certainly be better than this cast."

"Just no trying to talk him into it, Neal." said Peter. "You don't want to rush something like this."

"I know, Peter." said Neal rolling his eyes. El couldn't resist giggling at the two. "I haven't seen a
rule anywhere I can't hope for something though." Everyone was shocked into silence as the burner phone of El's rang.
"So think it's safe to answer?" asked El in between rings.

"Neal's more the expert with this. If he trusts it I will." said Peter.

Neal shrugs. "Probably since we have only used it to reach June once. I doubt anyone would have gotten much on it since." he said, "I'd be completely shocked if so."

El decides to answer. "Hello?" she said. She holds out the phone. "It's for you Neal, it's Mozzie." Neal takes the phone. "Peter, I could use some help gathering some laundry. Probably be nice to put fresh linens on the beds." El and Peter leave, walking upstairs.

"Hey Mozzie." said Neal into the phone as they leave. "I am almost shocked to hear from you considering."

"Yeah, I wasn't sure either." said Mozzie, still unsure if he should have called. "Were you serious Neal, about wanting to leave the life?"

"Yeah I think so." said Neal, sitting back on the couch. "I don't expect that you will want to nor will I turn on you, Moz, just please be okay with me wanting this choice for myself."

"I still think you are fooling yourself and I don't know how I feel about it besides wondering about Stockholm Syndrome." said Mozzie. "But I want to stick around at least until Keetes is handled...what can I say, you're like a brother to me even when I think you're acting insane."

"Thanks Moz. We definitely need to explore all sides on the Keetes thing." said Neal. "Any word with any of the contacts?"

"I mean everyone knows of him, but he's good at keeping a low profile." said Mozzie. "It's why he's the best at what he does. There's rumors he's been in the city, but I mean we know that considering." He pauses. "I wish I knew more, I really do."

"I understand. Keep yourself safe too, Mozzie. I don't want him to find you either." said Neal. "Go to ground if you must."

"I'm good and I know how to disappear." said Mozzie, agreeing. "I'm a master of disguise."

Neal has to resist laughing as Mozzie's disguises often were a change of shirt or glasses. "As we all know," said Neal. "If it's not too much to ask, is there any way we can get a couple extra burner phones over this way? Just to keep in contact with you and June."

"I will take care of that." said Mozzie. "I should go, I've already been on this line far too long. Talk to you later, Neal."

"Same, Moz." said Neal, hanging up the phone. He hears the Burke's on the stairs and takes a moment to create his usual mask before the reach the bottom step. He knew he should let them in, but he was too used to trying to control what people thought of him. He hoped he was making the right decisions these days.

"Hey Neal, have a good talk?" asked El.

"Better than the last one." said Neal, not wanting to say too much about it. He looks at Peter. "So
back to work?" He knew he could use the distraction.

"Let's have at it partner." said Peter. "I think I got a thought on that Mortenson loan scandal."

"Awesome." said Neal with a sigh, hating mortgage fraud cases. He wondered what he would do once the anklet was off job wise and what the odds were he could stay on at the FBI, as the interesting cases could be fun to work on. Hopefully eventually he would heal enough to go back undercover.
Chapter 35

Peter and Neal get back to work on the cases as El gets back to work on planning an event.

"Hey Neal, are black lilies too odd for a wedding?" asked El from where she's seated. She had been driving herself mad with choices in flowers all morning and knew the florist was about to throw a fit. She hoped Neal would have the answer and could bet he would love a quick distraction. "The bride is wanting black and white for everything. I'd love to toss in pink lilies or red roses, but it's her choice."

"If you mix them in the white, I think it will look fine." said Neal, avoiding the look from Peter. "No compromise at all with color - not even gold or silver? Both would look pretty as accents."

"I'll talk with her and see what she says." said El, making notes of what Neal had said.

"See Peter, I will get back to work." said Neal teasingly, going back to his file. "Some of us can multi-process."

Peter rolls his eyes. "Make sure I remind you of that next time I want to play a game while you are doing research on a case." he said, remembering their first year together as partners.

"That's different!" exclaimed Neal, looking up at Peter. "A game is distracting and loud, that only took a quick thought."

"Sure." said Peter, though he's almost laughing. He usually hated working from home, but he had to admit he was having a little fun.

"While we're all distracted anyways, mind if I ask a question?" said Neal, looking at Peter seriously.

"You having a question has never stopped you before and you've never asked." said Peter, glancing back up and seeing how serious Neal looks. "I swear if it starts with 'I'd be okay at June's', I will figure out a way to lock you in the guest room."

"Oh Peter." said Neal, his turn to roll his eyes. "It's not that. Just a question I have for after the anklet comes off." He nudges Peter with his right foot. "I promise it's not about a crime or anything either. Just curious about something."

"Okay, what is it?" said Peter, curious himself at this point to what the question is. "If it's a confession to crimes, I'd recommend you do that now versus then."

"Nope, not that and you'd have to throw me back in jail for that." said Neal with his usual taunt. "No, it's more what happens to us, this, the partnership when it comes off."

"I hadn't thought about it, really." said Peter, being honest. "I honestly figure you would want to book it out of New York and to Paris or London or anywhere but here once you get a chance."

"While all those places sound fun and I might want to hit each for a week or two, just I don't know." said Neal. Peter caught the note of nervousness. "Is there any chance we could still work together?"

"Are you asking if you could still work as a consultant?" said Peter, shocked. "I mean there's precedent and you have been valuable, but it would have to be run by Hughes. He would likely
approve it though. Is that what you would want to do?” Peter can't help but stare at Neal now.

"Just thinking of my options, but it's high on the list." said Neal, honestly. "I might would want a month or two off to travel a bit first."

El couldn't help but overhear the conversation. "Well I think no one would expect you not to want to." she said, chiming in. "Not even Peter."

"El's right, as always." said Peter. "But if it's what you want, I can talk to Hughes about it. Maybe after we catch Keetes and everything."

"Okay." said Neal, glad it could be an option. "I should get back to work." He starts reading the file again, trying to concentrate as his mind spins with his question answered.
"Do I even want to know where he gets these?" said Peter, walking in from getting the mail. Peter and Neal had dropped off working directly at 5pm and Neal had asked to lie down for awhile before dinner, so after Peter got him upstairs he had decided to check the mail. "I keep not asking as I figure it's not even legal."

"Get what?" asked El, looking up from an art book she was flipping through. She spies the plain box wrapped in twine. "Mozzie I assume?"

"Considering the front says 'To The Suits' in his handwriting, it's safe to guess. If it wasn't him, I doubt the guys watching the house would have let him through." said Peter with a sigh, wondering why Mozzie couldn't just ring the doorbell like a normal person. "Want to open it or shall I?"

"I'll let you at it." said El with a laugh. Peter opens the box and reveals a note in code and probably a half dozen burner phones. "Wow, he works fast. I assume the note is for Neal."

"Very likely." said Peter, sitting the note off to the side to give to Neal later. "Guess he wanted there to be enough to last for awhile." He closes the box and sits it on a shelf.

"He is very thorough." said El, sipping at a glass of wine. "Should one of us take the note up to Neal?"

"I think it can wait until dinner." said Peter, stretching and sitting down. "I think we both forgot to go to the store. Is there even anything in the house for dinner?"

"I'm sure I could whip something up." said El, yawning. The past few days had seemed long. "Or we could order something if you trust delivery."

"I can get the guys watching the house to make sure it's safe." said Peter. "Anything in particular sound good?"

"Well you always like pizza and it sounds easy." said El, picking up her phone and placing the order. "Plus should be easy enough for anyone to verify it's safe. Cheesy garlic bread or not?"

"Most definitely." said Peter.

El finishes up placing the order. "Oh, I have an idea. Do you know where the picnic blanket is?"

"It's probably in the hall closet somewhere." said Peter. "Why? What's your idea?"

"Instead of Neal having to eat alone or travel those stairs, why don't we just eat upstairs with him?" said El, explaining her idea. "Spread out the blanket, take up plates, the works. Plus it's something we have never done before here, so why not?"

"Actually that's a good idea." said Peter, getting up to go find the blanket. "Though it may feel a little too much like a slumber party for Neal's tastes."

"Trust me, he will at least find the idea of it nice." said El. She grabs a few plates and puts them on the tray with some paper napkins. "Now just to grab some drinks when the pizza arrives."

About an hour later, Peter hears a knock on the door and after verifying it's the pizza guy, he gets the pizza with a brown paper bag of warm cheesy garlic bread on top. "Want to carry the pizza and
I'll grab the tray?" he asked El. "Figure the pizza is lighter."

"Sure." said El, getting a hold of the pizza as Peter grabs some drinks and the tray and at that last second the letter from Moz. They walk up the stairs and knock on Neal's door.

"Come in Peter." said Neal, figuring Peter was there to tell him it was dinner time. He starts to get up when he spies the Burke's walking in. "Hey, what's going on?" El can't help but revel at the fact he genuinely looks surprised.

"Pizza picnic." said El, sitting the pizza on the dresser long enough to spread out the picnic blanket. "Figure we would bring the food to you. We can go if you want?"

"No, it's fine." said Neal, sitting back against the headboard. "This is nice of you guys."

"I have to give El the credit." said Peter, sitting the tray on the floor next to one side of the bed and passing plates and drinks around as El chooses to sit next to Neal and lean against the headboard and Peter sits cross-legged at the foot of the bed. El carefully sits the pizza box down. "Hope pizza is okay."

"Pizza is good." said Neal, still surprised, but finding comfort in the fact the Burke's wanted to have dinner with him. "Let's dig in."
"You smuggled a painting out by mailing it through the postal service from the building?" said El, falling over on the bed laughing. "In a mailing tube?" Dinner had long been over and everyone was stretched out on the bed in the guest room. "That's crazy!

"Who did you mail it to?" said Peter, honestly just curious at this point. "Or hypothetically since supposedly this is how you would have done it, as you have reminded us at least twice?" He glances at the clock. "Let's pretend Agent Burke went to bed thirty minutes ago when he should have and your friend Peter is here."

"Okay, hypothetically I would have mailed it to an alias who happened to have postal box in a post office several cities over." said Neal, laughing a little himself remembering the job. The security had been tight and he had to gone in through the ducts and it would have been impossible to carry it back out that way. "Museums don't really check their outgoing mail as they assume it's all going to the right place." He glances at Peter. "Or so I have heard."

"I mean, it does make sense they wouldn't." said El, thinking back to her art gallery days. "I don't think we ever really did because of well what Neal said. There's a bigger worry about incoming mail."

Peter starts to make a mental note to get security at the FBI office to start checking outgoing mail before he realizes Neal had been mentioning he wanted to go straight. Then again who knows if there were anyone corrupt in the office as it wouldn't be the first time, so he decides to go for it.

Neal seems to read his mind. "Planning to upgrade the security at White Collar?" he said, only sounding a little disappointed.

"Well more like the building...and we have had corrupt agents before." said Peter. "Not everything is about you, Neal." He added the last part jokingly, sipping at one of the beers he had brought up while he sees Neal sigh a little in relief. Truth was he mostly trusted Neal these days anyways, even before he was taken, though it had always made him feel better to verify.

"Ok, you two, no fighting or I'm sending you both to bed immediately." said El, giggling. "I always thought it was funny how Peter come home to say you sent champagne or cookies or good coffee to the van. I believe he even said once you sent them caviar?"

"Maybe..." said Neal, nodding at Neal, confirming he had. "I mean they are stuck in the van and I mean who could blame someone for taking some pity on them. Plus I've had the FBI coffee - trust me when I believe straight tar would taste better."

"Am I the only one who likes the van?" said Peter, a little bewildered.

"Yes." said El and Neal. Peter gives them both a look.

"Jones and Diana are too nice to tell you and everyone else is afraid of you." said Neal.

"People talk." said El, shrugging, sleepily. "I totally should get up and go to bed, but it's so comfy here."

"Definitely the same." said Peter, resting his head on a pillow he had grabbed from the chair in the corner. "Neal, tell us to go to bed."
Neal laughs, eyes half closed. "My job to order you two around now? I don't really have the energy to, despite how fun it sounds."

The trio fall asleep, not hearing one of the burner phones that is ringing on a bookshelf downstairs.
"Come on, come on." said Mozzie as he tries the burner phone for the third time. "Damn it Suits!" He takes a deep breath to keep from throwing the phone at the wall. He can only hope Peter really did have a crew watching their house as he had wandered outside of the city for his latest lead.

Peter wakes up a little later to the sound of Satchmo whining. "I get it, boy, you need to pee." he said noticing they had all fallen asleep in the guest room. He quietly gets up and walks downstairs with Satchmo and lets him out into the backyard. "There you go." He yawns as he pours himself a glass of water. He notices one of the burner phones is lit up on the bookshelf. He walks over and picks it up and notices a couple missed calls from Mozzie under 'Haversham' along with a voicemail. He hits play.

'Suit, this is about Keetes. We already know he knew where Neal lived, but he knows where you live too. I hope you really have a team there as you may need it. Word out is Keetes is looking for a couple new thugs and may be headed your way.' said the man sounding panicked. 'Tell Neal I'll take his advice and go to ground. He can get a note to me through Estelle.'

Peter quickly calls the van outside. He had figured Keetes could get his address, but the rest was enough to worry. "Peter, is everything okay?" said Jones, surprised to hear from his boss. "Is something wrong?"

"Jones, let's go with I heard from a source Keetes could be headed this way." said Peter, taking his spare sidearm out of the credenza by the kitchen and making sure it's loaded. He wasn't going to let anyone get near his wife or Neal. He lets Satchmo in, making sure to lock the door. "Have the team on high alert."

"Will do." said Jones, already assuming the source is Mozzie, but considering he was the reason they had found Neal to begin with, he knew the information could be spot on. "You all okay in there? I can get backup to you inside of fifteen minutes."

"No, with you guys outside, I think I will be good. I will be on guard as well." said Peter. "Trust I won't be going to sleep anytime soon." He makes sure the alarm is set. "Let me know the second you guys know anything." He hangs up, sighing, glad Neal is here as he would be too worried if he was across town at June's since he knew he would have to prioritize El in that scenario. He ushers the dog upstairs and follows closely behind, grabbing the burner phone Mozzie had called at the last minute.

Mozzie uses the key June had made for him to enter if he needed, though he could have easily gotten in with his lockpick set. He knew making a stop here might be a little stupid, but if Keetes was headed to the Burke's, this should be a safe spot long enough to wander to the guest room where he had left his favorite go-bag that would allow him to be prepared when he got to his safe house, Sunday. He couldn't resist stopping by Neal's apartment to grab a bottle of wine and a book off the shelf.

"Well, I wanted Neal...but taking out his best friend should hurt him well." said Keetes, following Mozzie in. He had been waiting for a chance to see who would enter.

"You must be Keetes." said Mozzie, swallowing hard and trying to hide his fear. "What are you doing here?"

"I knew you would warn Burke and here would be more safe. I spread that rumor hoping he would
hide Neal here." said Keetes, reaching for his gun. "I will be sure to tell Neal you said goodbye." A bang and a thud are the next sounds heard.
Mozzie sits down the gun he had found hidden in the guest room he had used awhile back. He could only assume it used to belong to Byron and probably was kept in the apartment when it was a gaming room and simply moved after his death. He hadn't mentioned it to Neal as he would be able to truthfully deny not knowing it's existence. He had picked it up figuring it might be useful until he got out of town. While he didn't find himself to be a violent man, he knew it had been down to him or Keetes and he found he had no qualms about taking out the guy who had kidnapped Neal. He glanced at Keetes, seeing the single bullet hole to his head and picks up the burner phone to call June.

"Mozzie, dear, what's wrong?" said June, sleepily. "Is Neal okay? It's the middle of the night."

"Hey June. I am not sure how to say this, so I'm going to come out with it." said Mozzie, nervously. June would have every right to be pissed at them. "I used Byron's old gun to kill Keetes - I had stopped by to pick something up and Keetes had a gun."

"What? Are you sure he's dead?" said June, sitting up in bed at her daughter's house. "Does Peter know?"

"It was self defense! And yes, Neal taught me how to use a gun years ago," said Mozzie. "And not yet, he's next on my call list."

"Make it quick. I believe he will try to do damage control." said June, finding herself too happy Neal's kidnapper was dead, even if it cost a headache later. Byron had only told her there was a gun upstairs, she hadn't known for sure and honestly hadn't figured it would be loaded. She would take the fall before it fell back on Neal though if it came to it. "Hopefully you have a second phone?"

"Always, June. Talk to you later." Mozzie hangs up, grabs the spare phone out of his pocket, and calls Peter's cell phone.

Peter jumps as he hears his cell phone ring. Grabbing it out of his pocket, he quickly walks into the master bedroom as to not wake Neal or El. "Hello?"

"Hello Peter." said Mozzie, figuring it was a good time to use the Suit's actual name. "There's some news."

"And you didn't call the burner? What's going on?" said Peter, concerned. "Is it Keetes?" He said the last part in more of a whisper.

"Well yes, and why I called your phone. Keetes is dead." said Mozzie. "I shot him."

"What?" said Peter, louder than he meant. He hears noise from the guest room and figures he woke one of them. "Speak fast as I woke either El or Neal."

"I went to June's to get something. Keetes was waiting here, his plan involved you bringing Neal here once you heard he was headed for you. It appears he spread the rumor." said Mozzie, speaking slowly. "I shot and killed him."

"You have a gun?" said Peter, shocked. "Please tell me it's not Neal's."

"It's not. It was in the guest room I used when I got shot." said Mozzie, truthfully. "I found it, never told Neal as I wouldn't risk the wingtips tossing him in prison over it."
"And why did you have it on you?" said Peter, being torn between being grateful Keetes isn't a danger and trying to figure out how to sort this mess out.

"I was going on the run, Suit. You had to have heard my voicemail by now." said Mozzie exasperated. "What should I do next?"

"Sit still. I'm calling Diana." said Peter. "She will handle your end. I need to not be too involved if I can try to help out our friend."
El walks in as Peter hangs up. "What's going on hun?" she said. "And don't tell me nothing as you have serious face going on."

"Keetes is dead...in Neal's loft. Mozzie did it in self-defense." said Peter with a sigh. "I can't go into more details as plausible deniability right now...I've known Neal and Mozzie far too long...but within hours, I could have at least heard from the team and it would make sense if you somehow overheard."

"Do we wake Neal and tell him?" said El, worried, but not being able to be happy to know Keetes is dead.

"Yeah we probably should." said Peter. "Though we need to keep the details limited as usual. Luckily Mozzie keeps checking for bugs here. I need to get rid of this though soon." He holds out the burner phone, having already removed the sim card and broken the phone in half. "At least it doesn't trace to us." Peter walks outside on his patio and manages to sneak the pieces into two different neighbor's trash before heading back in, glad tomorrow morning is pick-up. He had been sure to wipe all fingerprints. He tosses the sim card into the fireplace, for once grateful they had forgotten and left a fire going. Putting out the fire after a few minutes - grateful it was gas - he knew it would be too destroyed. He knew he was being paranoid as Mozzie would be sure to get rid of the other phone. "Let's go tell Neal."

Over at June's mansion, "I've told you everything." said Mozzie, as Diana verifies the story. She certainly believes him, but has to follow procedure. "It was self defense!"

"Calm down Moz, it's pretty clear." said Diana. "It's cut and dry, but questions have to be asked."

"I told the Suit I didn't want to be here. I'm going to get arrested and put into the system for this." said Mozzie, panicking. "And again, Neal had no idea the gun was there."

"It's all going into the report, trust me." said Diana, trying to comfort Moz. She had no idea, but she sort-of liked him as an acquaintance. "No one is being arrested." She turns to the coroner. "It's fine to remove the body, the forensic team has enough pictures and evidence." She waves them all out so it's her and Mozzie. She turns off the recorder she keeps in her pocket during these incidents. "Anything I need to know off the record? Neal's my friend too."

"Like I said, I told you everything." said Mozzie.

"And you are handling this a bit too well...like you talked to someone else." said Diana, curiously. Mozzie certainly was panicking, but had told the story almost too well. "Let me know now so we can help Neal. If it's about Peter, same."

"I might have called the Suit first...different phones for both of us though." said Mozzie, whispering.

"Off the record still...get rid of that phone." whispered Diana back. "Peter will know to do the same."

"Already thought of, Lady Suit." said Mozzie, with a small smile. He had plans to toss it over the nearest bridge on his way home and had hidden it temporarily downstairs.

"That's all you can go," said Diana. "We'll contact June." She notices the look on Mozzie's face.
"Again." Diana leaves with Mozzie close behind. Out on the streets and far away from anyone's sight, he removes the sim card and tosses the phone over a bridge he passes and tosses the card in the nearest trash can. Knowing Peter would get rid of the other phone, he walks away with a smile.
"Are you going in there first or me?" asked El, as both her and Peter stand outside the guest room. "You've been standing there a good twenty minutes. Does someone need to tell you to cowboy up for once?"

"No, I'm going...this is just not something I expected to tell Neal." said Peter, sighing and opening the door. He walks in and sees his partner dozing with a book on his chest. Neal must have woken up at some point after El left and fallen back asleep while waiting on them. Taking a deep breath, Peter nudges Neal. "Neal, hey, wake up."

"Hm, uh yeah." said Neal with a start, knocking the book onto the bed next to him. He moves it to the nightstand. "I was waiting on you two as El thought she heard your phone rang. Who called at this late?" He adds a bit jokingly, "Surely the team wouldn't think a mortgage fraud would be THAT important."

Peter sits down on the bed next to Neal. "Neal, I have to tell you something and it's serious."

"What is it, Peter?" said Neal, noticing Peter's serious face and glancing at El before looking back at Peter. "What's going on?"

"Mozzie called me. He went by June's to pick up some things after dropping off the burner phones." said Peter, trying to figure out how to tell Neal what's going on. "Keetes followed him and the gist of it is in self-defense Mozzie shot and killed him."

"W-w-what?" said Neal, sitting farther up quickly and holding his abdomen. "No, this has to be a joke, Peter. Mozzie wouldn't hurt anyone." He paused for just a second. "Is Mozzie okay?"

"I'm serious, Neal, I wouldn't lie to you about anything this big." said Peter, wanting to give his friend a hug looking at the pain in his eyes. "And it really happened. Diana is taking care of it, but it should be pretty cut and dry. We had to get rid of a burner phone already though."

Neal doesn't ask, figuring it was for Mozzie and figures he'll find out eventually. "Will he be arrested?" asked Neal, knowing even the idea of it drives Mozzie insane.

"Not if I have anything to say about it...or the team." said Peter. "It's just more knowing you both will have to live with it." Neal gives Peter a confused look and Peter realizes he left out probably the biggest piece. "It all took place in your apartment at June's."

"Oh man." said Neal, burying his face in his hands. He looks up a couple moments later. "Someone has to tell June...and wait, with what gun?" Neal looks genuinely startled and while Peter knows Neal could fake it, this seemed very real.

"I'll make sure she knows." said Peter. "And it appears it belonged to likely Byron, so I guess you could say it's June's. She's out of town, so as long as it's registered she should be fine considering she's not even in this state."

El sits down on the bed on the other side of Neal. "Are you okay, sweetie? That's probably a dumb question, but considering."

"For once, I have to say I feel speechless." said Neal, letting everything he's been told in the last few minutes roll through his mind as it was very shocking. "So I really don't know, El."
El wraps her arm around Neal, while Peter moves to where he can put his arm around Neal as well - both Burke's flanking Neal on the bed. All three are lost in thought and they all knew there would be no more sleep tonight.
Tuesday morning finds both Burke's and Neal at the breakfast table, cradling cups of coffee. Bowls of half-eaten cereal sit in front of them, but all had been too stressed to eat, thinking about last night's events.

"So will you need to go into the office today?" asked El to Peter after enough silence. "With everything that's going on."

"Officially, I don't know anything until someone from the team calls." said Peter. "So right now we're on a wait and see thing." As if by magic his phone rings. Peter picks it up and walks into the kitchen to answer.

"Want to make bets on who is the one calling?" said Neal, trying to sound cheerful.

"What would be our wager?" said El, half-heartedly playing along as she looks into the room Peter just walked into.

"Hm, whomever wins gets to learn a secret about the other person." said Neal, after thinking a moment. "The loser doesn't have to confess to anything too crazy or illegal...and we both swear on Satchmo's life not to lie."

"Bringing the dog into this?" said El, with a giggle. "But you're on. I'll say Diana."

"I'm going to go one up and say Hughes." said Neal pondering a moment and figuring it's the most likely knowing Peter's boss. "Possibly wanting to make it the most official by being the one to tell Peter."

"We'll see...I hope to learn one of your secrets though." said El, smiling. "You're a mystery to most of us."

Neal tips an invisible hat. "Just the way I like it." he said with a smile. Peter walks back in and rolls his eyes at Neal's antics.

"So who was it?" asked El, glancing at Neal. "We're both curious."

"Hughes was calling with the news." said Peter, noticing something is up between El and Neal as Neal quietly gives a little cheer. "What were you two up to?"

"We made bets on who would call." said El, looking at Neal and rolling her eyes laughing. "Alright, Neal, you win."

"Do I even want to know the wager?" said Peter, sitting down. "Hughes wants me and Neal in soon to officially be on the record we know. I said we would come by Wednesday after Neal's doctor appointment."

"We wagered a secret." said El. "It was Neal's idea."

"Do I get to be in on it?" said Peter, curiously.

Neal shrugs. "El lost, so it's really up to her." he said. "El?"

"Fine, fine. I once streaked in public." said El, blushing. Peter gives her a weird look. "What, Peter, it was college." Both boys burst out in laughter. "I was dared."
"This definitely does not leave this house." said Peter at Neal, though still laughing. "But yeah I never would have guessed, hun."

"Seems you have two lawbreakers in the house." said Neal, continuing with the fun to keep the seriousness of what's going on out of his head as much as possible. "Whatever will you do Peter? Oh, did you get arrested El?"

"I did." said El. "I was only in jail for a couple hours that time until some of my friends bailed me out and I only got a warning."

"I see I have lost already." said Peter, shaking his head.

Neal catches the error in what El said. "Wait, that time?" asked Neal, coyly.

El realizes her mistake. "Ah what I get for telling secrets on pretty much zero sleep. Fine, I also caught got with a fake ID once. I spent an overnight. Peter knows about that one - it came up under surveillance."

One of the burner phones on the bookshelf rings. Everyone looks towards it at once. "Will I even want to know who that is?" asked Peter, walking over. "Hello?"
"Hey Peter." said June. "I just received a call from the FBI about the death in my house. I wasn't sure which phone to try, and Mozzie suggested this one."

"Yeah, Hughes just filled us in officially." said Peter, mouthing the word 'June' to El and Neal, who nod. "I'm afraid you may have a bit of a mess at your house and in your life."

"I'm not at all worried about that. In fact I will be calling my lawyer after this in case me or Mozzie end up needing one." said June with a laugh. "I've been through messes as well."

"I have no doubt about that." said Peter, wondering how he's made friends it seems with half of Neal's criminal friends. "I figure the mess in your house will be worst."

"It's one of the reasons I'm calling. When would I be able to set up professional cleaners?" asked June, looking at her planner despite figuring it would likely be days. "I am still out of town and would like to have it taken care of before I get back."

"I don't know for sure." said Peter. "But probably in a few days. I can let you know or at least get Diana or Jones to let you know in case I'm left out of this case."

"That would be fine." said June. "May I speak to Neal for a moment?"

"Sure." said Peter, handing the phone to Neal.

"Hey June." said Neal, sitting back in his chair as the Burke's walk out to the patio to give him a bit of privacy. "There are no words for how sorry I am about all of this."

"None of it is your fault, darling." said June, knowing Neal would be blaming himself.

"Well if I hadn't met up with you at the thrift store that day...and ended up living in your guest room." said Neal. "Then all this..."

"You know, you've only brought excitement back in my life since then. And guys like Keetes are nothing like you and you know that." said June, feeling as if she was scolding a son. Neal had definitely come to feel like one. "The bigger issue might be if you will feel comfortable in the space again."

"Peter and El will likely tire of me eventually...especially by the time I can climb stairs without help," said Neal, half-jokingly. "So guess it will be the loft or the hotel. I mean if you are still okay with me living there."

"It will always be fine by me, but I don't think you give Peter enough credit." said June, having talked to Peter many times while Neal was gone. "He cares a great deal about you." She's met with silence as Neal is thinking. "Another subject, Mozzie says you are thinking about going straight? I mean it is Mozzie....but doesn't sound like something he would make up."

"It's definitely something I am considering." said Neal with a sigh. "I can't say I don't like the thrill of the life, but I guess it takes hitting this kind of rock bottom to make one think about it seriously."

"It still have some time on my anklet, so guess it's the time I have to think about it."

"True. I support you either way Neal...but I think you might be right." said June, wishing the best
for Neal. "And Mozzie will come around, you know he will. Nothing could separate you
two...besides prison or a hospital." June and Neal both laugh, knowing Mozzie too well. "I should
probably go. Give my love to Elizabeth?"

"It would be my pleasure." said Neal. They exchange goodbyes and Neal hangs up, sitting the
phone down on the table. He gets lost in thought thinking about all the things going through his
mind....and what tomorrow will bring with both the doctor and Hughes.
"Well some of it was good news." said Peter, looking at Neal in the car after the doctor appointment. "Three more weeks and he thinks the ribs should be good to go and similar with your arm. You are ahead of schedule. Plus you got the splint for your arm - it should give you more motion."

"Though I still have to sleep in it like the cast." said Neal morosely. "And I'm stuck with the leg cast for now with no date to when it will be over so far."

"You win some, you lose some." said Peter, feeling a paternal ping like he should be taking Neal out for ice cream. "To be fair, you have been doing a little walking on it despite being told not to."

Neal rolls his eyes. "It's impossible not to." he said, with a whine to his voice. He's quiet for a moment. "I'm just not used to being so still."

"That I believe," said Peter, pulling up into his usual parking space at the FBI office. "Last stop and we can go home." He was almost shocked how that rolled of his tongue, but he did feel as if it could be Neal's home as well or at least a place to call home. He grows serious. "I do have to warn you of something Hughes will likely mention. You will have to see a therapist at some point. Officially you should have before working any cases at all, but since it's just files, everyone has overlooked it."

"And the hits keep on coming." said Neal, banging his head against the back of the seat. "No way at all to get out of it?"

"Sorry but no. I'll talk to Hughes about you seeing the therapist all of us see after hard cases or injuries." said Peter, patting Neal on the shoulder. "You're a valued member of the team, so he'll make it work."

Upstairs a bit later in Hughes' office, "So I'm going to cut to the chase - I know Peter told you what happened." said Hughes, looking at Peter and Neal sitting in the guest chairs. "So while I am supposedly filling you guys in, let's talk about other things. I assume Peter has told you that before you can resume work here in the office, you will need to see a therapist? I already set you up to see the one here."

"Yes, but I'm fine, I swear." said Neal sounding a little petulant.

"Okay. No rush yet as I want you two to continue working from home for a bit." said Hughes. "At least until we can officially close the Keetes case. It also buys Neal a little more recuperation time." Hughes make sure to put emphasis on the last part, as if it's the real reason.

"Can I ask one...well two questions?" asked Neal, looking between Peter and Hughes.

"Shoot." said Hughes, sitting on the edge of his desk. "Though I can't be sure I will be able to answer or answer to your liking."

"What will happen to Moz? And June?" said Neal curiously, worried about both. "That's actually both questions."

"I plan to rule Keetes death self defense, so as long as your friend keeps his head out of trouble for a few days, he's in the clear." said Hughes. "June will be needed to come in for a bit of questioning about the gun and the incident, but if it all clears, she should be in the clear as well." He sighs.
“Peter, can I have a word in private?” Peter and Hughes walk out to Peter's office, leaving Neal concerned about what is being talked about. He debates getting up to eavesdrop, but figures they will likely see him through the window between Hughes and Peter's offices. His mind reels waiting on Peter to return.
"Is something wrong?" asked Peter as him and Reese entered his office. He glances over at Neal still sitting in a chair in Hughes' office, surprised Neal hasn't wandered closer in hopes to overhear something or entered the hall in hopes to make it look like he was stretching his legs. Neal being still was way too weird for him. "I really don't feel Neal knew about the gun nor had any idea Keetes would be there or even that Mozzie would shoot in self defense."

"I agree, Peter. No charges are going up against him, nor will he be returning to prison." said Hughes with his usual serious tone. "Just with his probation and the marshals and what happened and the gun being there...they are refusing to let him live there if he wants to continue his work-release deal. Even without his knowledge, the history of the place has come up along with the gun."

"What?" said Peter. "June has given him a comfortable and spacious home for the...let's be honest, pennies practically the government is willing to pay for his living arrangements. And she genuinely cares about him. Hell she treats him as if he was a son."

"I do realize that Peter and this honestly isn't my call and is above my head as well as yours." said Hughes, with a sigh. "Neal will have to seek other arrangements despite how we all feel. There is the hotel you set him up with originally as an option."

"I attempted to stay there myself when we were upgrading our wiring...it's not a good place for anyone to stay." said Peter, wondering when he had started getting so defensive of Neal. He did shudder at the memory of the hotel, the dog, and the lack of a TV. "Go check it out for yourself."

"Trust I believe you, but where in New York City within his radius could he get a place for $700 a month?" asked Hughes. "I can tell you, basically no where."

Peter sighs, wondering what to do. "Well I had planned for him to stay with me until he made a recover anyways," said Peter. "What if I was willing to rent a room to him? We have our third floor that we barely use."

Hughes starts to laugh until he realizes Peter is serious. "You would really want Caffrey to live with you?" he said. "And what would Elizabeth say?"

"Honestly, she would probably hang me from the tree in front of our townhouse if I didn't at least consider it."

"I mean it is at least a deviation from standard procedures, but what part of your partnership with him hasn't been." said Hughes, pondering.

"There is a few months before Neal will be out of the leg cast. We could even fix up the third floor and call it an apartment," said Peter, thinking about the legal side. "Then I would technically just be a landlord and it should be fine if he lived there considering."

"True, true and it could be argued you have had the most profound effect on him since he's been out." said Hughes. "Question is would Neal be okay with it?"

"I mean his choice is that or the hotel." said Peter. "Run it through the channels to make sure it would all be above board and I'll talk to Elizabeth tonight."
"I will do and we both probably have a few favors we could pull to make it work as long as it's done right." said Hughes. "Bring it up Caffrey to hear his thoughts as well and I will let you know when I know for sure." Hughes takes a deep breath. "I need to go check out the stake-out schedule - take him home and let him rest."

Peter wanders back to Reese's office, wondering how to even bring this up to Neal later. When he had finally agreed to Neal's deal, he had never figured he would end up living with the con man.
Chapter 46

On the car ride from the office, Neal noticed Peter was exceptionally quiet. Not being able to take it any longer, "Peter, tell me, okay. What did Hughes say?" He thought for a moment. "Is my deal being revoked and I'm going back to prison? If so, I deserve a heads up."

"No, Neal, it's not that." said Peter glancing at Neal. "That's all fine, though we need to talk later. I have to talk to El first is all and then I promise to explain."

"Why would you need to talk to El?" asked Neal, genuinely confused. "Why would El be involved?"

"It's not important and everything will be fine." said Peter, trying to sound comforting and figuring he's failing. He can't help but think Elizabeth is so much better at this stuff. "Can we drop this for awhile?"

Neal goes quiet and Peter is grateful the rest of the ride home is quiet. After getting Neal settled on the couch with a pain pill and a glass of ice water, he waits until he hears him snoring softly to talk to El on the back patio.

"So what's going on?" said El, sitting at her tea. She spies Peter glancing in through the window at Neal. "Peter, just tell me. You texted me it was important and I can handle it if it's bad news."

"More like just news and then something we need to talk about. Hughes had a talk with me. Neal can no longer stay at June's." said Peter, continuing to glance inside every couple of minutes. "The gun issue makes it a violation of his promotion."

"Oh don't tell me he has to go back to that hotel." said El. "Even you couldn't take it one night and ended up at June's." She notices a 'how did you know' look from Peter. "Diana ended up telling me not even a couple weeks later. She answers your phone more than you, you know."

"I should have guessed." said Peter laughing, only a little annoyed someone had told on him on that one. "I don't want him to go there either. Remember how we talked about making the third floor an apartment years ago when we bought the house?"

"Yeah? We dropped it as we weren't sure if we wanted tenants." said El, a little confused. She suddenly smiles. "You want to fix it up for Neal, don't you?"

"Hughes has to make sure it clears, but yeah I do. We both planned to let Neal stay here until he could handle more stairs anyways." said Peter, nodding. "But let's be honest, he's over a lot and he probably could be talked into being your official taste tester."

"You don't have to sell him to me. He's become a friend to both of us...plus he has better taste than you." said El, adding the last part as a joke. "I mean if you are up for it, sure...though a part of me wonders if you just want to keep a closer eye on him."

"I can't say it wouldn't be nice, but not quite for the same reasons. More out of guilt for what happened." said Peter. "And he doesn't deserve to lose everything."

"I agree, Peter." said El. "And he seems to want to change and I think we both agree to wanting that."

Peter nods. "Very much so. We would receive the same stipend, though it's not about the money at
"Well he's starting to wake." said El, peeking inside. "Go tell him and see what he thinks."
"Peter, just say whatever it is." said Neal, glancing between the Burke's sitting in chairs across from the couch. "I promise I'm a big boy and can handle it. It's clear you talked to El about whatever it is, even though I still don't know why she would be involved with whatever Hughes said." He stared directly at Peter. "I promise not to do anything stupid."

"Well while that promise helps, I have to tell you either way." said Peter, still unsure how his partner would take the news. "Hughes talked to me about you living at June's...more like after this mess, the fact you won't be allowed to as it will revoke your deal." He looked at Neal long and hard.

"I shouldn't be surprised." said Neal, covering his face with his good hand. "So back to the motel I assume?" He really really hated that motel.

"That is one option." said Peter, glancing at El. "Though I have a better one. Why don't you just live here, with me and El? At least until you lose the anklet and have finished your sentence."

"What?" said Neal, sounding genuinely shocked. "I couldn't do that Peter, not impose on you guys any longer. As is, I have no idea how long you are going to keep me here." He had added the last part jokingly, but Peter hadn't given him any sign and he wasn't sure he wasn't past his welcome. Peter couldn't really want him to stay here for the years left on his sentence, he thought.

"You can and I think you should. El and I planned years ago when we bought the house to likely turn the third floor into an apartment...especially since we cannot have kids. So there would be plenty of space. It's not as big as June's...but you could have your own space." said Peter, wondering how Neal was able to charm people considering he wished for that power about now. "It would take a few months, but it's going to be that long until you are out of that leg cast anyways...which is how long I planned for you to stay anyways."

"Neal, honestly you'd almost be doing us a favor. The third floor sits empty and I almost find it sad." said El, moving to sit next to Neal. "Just a reminder it won't be used. So you using it would be a huge favor to both of us."

Neal looked at El, seeing her pleading eyes. He had no idea if she was telling the truth, but he always found he couldn't say no to her. He glances at Peter and said, "Hughes would really be okay with me living here?"

"He likely figures I could keep an eye on you easier." said Peter, laughing a little. "Though we both know you could sneak out from an even higher floor...like you did in Venice. He's got to run it by some higher-ups, but he doesn't expect to hit any issues...especially as I'm the only one who's ever caught you." He can't resist his usual taunt at Neal and tries to hide a laugh when Neal glares at him.

"Are you sure you are both okay with this?" asked Neal with a sigh. "I mean I do have to admit it's better than the motel and the $700 wouldn't be able to afford anything else in my radius."

"We're sure." said El, giving Neal's hand a squeeze. "And you'd be welcome to stay as long as you want. You're pretty much family to use by now, I hope you know that."

Neal looks between the Burke's, thinking similar - at least he would love to be family to them. It would be better than the family he had been born into. "Fine, I'll stay." said Neal, giving in.
"Hopefully I at least get to pick the paint colors for the upstairs!"
A month later, Neal finds himself sitting in a chair in the waiting room for the FBI's therapist. He had finally been cleared to do more walking around and was wanting to get back to work at the office, but Peter had insisted he see the therapist first. Luckily he had been able to talk Peter out of waiting with him, promising to meet Peter up at his office when he was through.

"Mr Caffrey, Dr Quill will see you now." said a secretary at the front desk, smiling at Neal. "She's the second door on the right."

"Thank you." said Neal, standing up and getting his balance with the cane and walking to the office. He enters, spotting a semi-attractive woman who looked to be in her later 40's sitting behind a nice desk. "Dr Quill I assume?" he said after knocking.

"You must be Neal, come in." said Dr Quill, pointing at a chair. "You can call me Maggie, everyone does. First name basis is always easier."

"Well nice to meet you Maggie." said Neal, taking off his hat and sitting down. "So as you know, I have to see you to get cleared back for working in the office."

"Yep, it's standard procedure." said Maggie. "We'll have lots to talk about, but let's go with how are you feeling now."

"I'm good." said Neal, it mostly being truthful. "I am living in Agent Burke and when he finishes an apartment he's been meaning to add to his third floor, I will be living there. You probably know I used to live over..."

"Neal, that's what you're doing. How are you feeling?" said Maggie, smiling, but gently interrupting. "Peter warned me about you...and I am to warn you that this could turn into multiple visits if you try to misdirect."

Neal rolls his eyes. "I'm actually doing good considering over a month ago I was kidnapped and held for nearly two weeks...and I had multiple injuries. I'm down to this now." He pats at the leg the walking boot is on. Luckily Dr Rogers had went for a lighter one at the last visit. "I'm hoping eventually to make a full recovery on it."

"That's good to hear Neal." said Maggie, making a few notes. "And about Keete's death?"

"I can't say I'm unhappy he's dead, though I wouldn't have wanted him dead." said Neal, wishing to be anywhere else. "And well I'm sorry that it all happened at my friend June's house in the apartment I used to live. But I'm not a violent person."

"That is in your file." said Maggie, smiling at Neal. "And your experience sounds pretty normal to me."

Maggie asks Neal a few more questions and makes notes of the answers. "So how are you feeling about your sentence and working for the FBI?"

"I want to make it work. I want to eventually work as a consultant for the FBI." said Neal, looking serious. "It may cost me some old friends, but I think it will be worth it. I need to do what's right and I know I don't want to have a rerun of what happened."

"That all sounds reasonable. Are you sure it is what will make you happy?" said Maggie.
"I'm very sure...more than I have been about anything else." said Neal, being very honest. "There's still work to do and I know I have to finish the sentence to be able to prove to myself and everyone else I can do it though."
"How did the appointment go?" asked Peter, seeing Neal walk into his office. "I will check..." The threat is half-empty as he knew Neal was desperate to be back at work.

"I went and talked to Dr Quill. Brown hair, green eyes, about 5'6" with her heels, late 40's." said Neal rolling his eyes. "She also gave me this." He hands over the paper she had signed stating he could start back work at the office. "I told her you even might call her to check."

"You know, I would have long ago." said Peter, giving the paper a once over and setting it aside. "But yeah, I am working on trusting you. Hughes may though."

"I wouldn't expect anything less." said Neal, taking a seat in Peter's office. "So do I start today or when? I'm tired of being stuck in one place."

"How about you help me out on cases here today and you can start officially tomorrow?" said Peter, trying to compromise. "I had Diana set up some things in the conference room so you could work from there. Laptop and all."

"You just can't let me out of your sight yet, can you?" said Neal jokingly, knowing this time it wasn't about trust. "I never blamed you, you know. And you got to stop feeling guilty."

"I know, just give me one more day." said Peter. "I'm working on it really. I have to see Dr Quill myself later for this very reason, except El is making me."

Neal shrugged, mentally thanking El and reminding himself to do so later. "Whatever you want." he said before wandering next door. "Hey Diana...and hey Jones." Neal spots Jones walking in with some files.

"Caffrey, it's good to see you." said Jones, giving Neal a fist-bump before handing him the files. "It's been way too quiet around here without you."

"Don't inflate his ego already, Jones, we could have survived." said Diana, but giving Neal a wink, admitting she was happy to see him back as well. "And see Peter misses you already." She points at the door between Peter's office and the conference room that Peter had propped open while they were talking. "He's totally having separation anxiety."

"Nearly two months of staying there and the plan to move to his third floor when he finishes up should have starting to ease his mind." said Neal. "Plus the anklet's on." He can't help but laugh a little. "I don't think I could be more watched short of him bugging me."

"Don't give him ideas." said Diana. "He might get tempted."

"Get back to work!" yelled Peter, though meaning nothing by it. "There are cases to solve." It makes Diana and Jones laugh a little.

"We should go. I'm going to do a coffee run - want anything Neal?" asked Diana. "And I mean good coffee from down the street, not the office sludge."

"Cream, two sugars?" said Neal, taking Diana's offer as her way of saying he was part of the team and that she cared about him. "No decaf - Peter's been trying to fool me for a month."

"Will do." said Diana, laughing and leaving with Jones, getting Peter's order before heading
downstairs.

Neal hears his phone chime and looks down to see it's Mozzie. It had been a few weeks since he had heard from him and he returned the text with 'Everything set up?' and smiled when he got a 'Yep' in reply. He smiled and opened a file, knowing Peter was in for a surprise.
Three months later, Neal is happy to finally have the leg cast off, even if it means he won't be able to run on it for awhile. "At least I have been cleared for all the walking I want to do." said Neal, finishing up carrying stuff upstairs to the newly finished apartment. "And it only took you an extra couple months to finish this area."

"Yeah yeah nag the agent who has had every weekend busy." said Peter, struggling with a heavy box. "Did June send bricks?"

"I believe it's books." said El, carrying a box. "I never knew you owned so many, Neal."

"About half the ones she sent are mine and half are ones I liked she gave me." said Neal, sitting down a box. "And we're finally done. It's really nice." He looks around the apartment. The front half facing the streets was a combination of a sitting area with a TV, a small kitchenette with a small bar table and stools, and an art area by the windows. The back half of the space was the bedroom, closet space, and bathroom. "It's nice all put together."

El takes a seat on couch. "I can't believe June let you have essentially whatever you wanted." she said, pulling Peter down to sit next to her.

"I tried not to take advantage - just the couch, two chairs, and the easel." said Neal sitting down in one of the chairs. "I told her I would give them back if or when I found something better."

"Just keep in mind you are welcome to the kitchen downstairs whenever. The kitchenette we squeezed in is tiny," said El, giving Neal a warm smile. "I know you are a grown man who likes his space, but it would be nice to still do some meals together after all the time you've been living downstairs."

"I will definitely take you up on that." said Neal, getting up and grabbing a few bottles of water and passing them around. "I realize I'm lucky, I couldn't have found a place half this size for the $700."

"Very true." said Peter with a smile. "Speaking of price and money, I've been getting a lot of reports of art museums and galleries and even personal investors getting pieces delivered back anonymously. You wouldn't happen to know anything about that?"

"Nope, not really. I can guess it's someone feeling bad." said Neal, quietly, but with a smile. "I mean I couldn't possible be doing that in my radius." He was happy he had been able to talk Mozzie into returning most of what was in his stashes, though he figured Mozzie likely kept a few things for himself. His friend had gotten over him going straight, but Moz wasn't an idiot and wouldn't do all this work for free. "It's good news isn't it?"

"Yeah it is." said Peter, smiling at his partner. He suspected Mozzie, but wasn't going to be looking into it. "It definitely shows a change in character. By the way, I talked to Hughes about what you were inquiring awhile back - if you could work as a consultant after. He wanted me to show you this."

Peter hands Neal an envelope he takes out of his back pocket.

Neal opens it and reads. "Hm, a full time consultant job just as I was asking. He's making the decision this early?" he said, glancing up at Peter.
"I think he figures he can get you at a steal compared to what agents make." said Peter sipping at his water. "It's $40k a year for consultants vs $60k for starting agents."

"Well, how would he possibly know what it would be in..." Neal continues to read the letter and almost drops it when he notices the date. "Why is this dated for a job opening here in a little over a month?"

"Because of this." said El, pulling out a folder she had hidden under a cushion earlier. Neal gives her an inquisitive look as she hands it to Peter.

"Oh look a commutation letter." said Peter toying a little with Neal. "I wonder who it's possibly for." He hands the folder to Neal and smiles as he sees the news hit Neal's face. "I think every single person in White Collar petitioned for you."

"Does this mean what I think it means?" said Neal, looking up and at the Burke's.

"Only if it means you won't be moving out immediately after all my work." said Peter smiling. "And that you will stay for awhile...at least a year or two."

"I may never leave." said Neal. "Well besides maybe to travel as this suspiciously doesn't start for awhile."

Peter pulls out the key to Neal's anklet. "Put it up for the last time, partner."

Neal stands and props his foot on the coffee table as Peter unlocks it. "I can't say that doesn't feel good." he said. "Though it would almost be sad to go to Paris alone."

El smiles. "Well there's tickets for three downstairs for two weeks in Paris. Want a couple guests?" she said. "If not we could go on our own..."

"I'll take that offer." said Neal, hugging Peter and then El. "Though I may have a couple more locations I want to see before I return for work next month."

Fin!

Chapter End Notes

I realized a huge error and deleted the final chapter to fix - it's now back.

If it seems rushed, I wanted to end it at a nice even number of chapters!

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