The Woman in Blue

by Silbrith

Summary

Case: Neal's loyalties are tested when an old friend asks him to help steal a Vermeer. A cybercriminal, dubbed Azathoth by Mozzie, targets Peter and Neal. H/C: abduction, injuries, flashbacks, angst. Fluff: Family Day at Columbia, gaming convention, Halloween at the Burke family cabin. September - October 2004. Set within the Caffrey Conversation AU.
"So, if three numbers are the same, I'd have to pay Jones $30, but then I'd collect $50 from the rest of you. Like to try it again?" Neal Caffrey scooped up the dice and prepared to roll them. The small group of people gathered around his desk launched into a feverish scribbling of numbers on slips of paper.

"Hold on a minute. Let me run the numbers." Jones pulled out his calculator and tapped madly through the probabilities.

"Hey, no fair," Diana slammed back. "Give me a chance to win back my money."

"Isn't using a calculator cheating?" Tricia asked, eyeing Jones suspiciously.

Peter laughed as he looked down at the bullpen. The agents didn't stand a chance. Neal would win all their lunch money and then some, and they wouldn't even mind. Quite a transformation from what it was like when he joined White Collar nine months ago. Peter remembered all too well the initial unease the agents had felt about having a criminal become a member of their team. But Neal had worked hard at gaining their respect, and it was gratifying to see how that distrust had now changed into acceptance. Of course, the Caffrey charm offensive hadn't hurt either.

Neal had even managed to calm Peter's nerves. His inner Neal radar used to be constantly on, monitoring for any trouble. In the beginning Peter had been on high alert for a skeleton from Neal's past to reappear or for an entanglement in some scheme of Mozzie's, or any other in a long list of pitfalls. But Peter's radar had been turned off for months now. Next item on the agenda: curb that reckless streak.

Heading down the stairs, he mocked the group, "How much is Neal taking you for this time?"

"Why, Peter, I was simply instructing them in the finer points of the Bird Cage. Think of all the money you saved by not needing to hire an instructor. And, frankly, I'm shocked that Quantico didn't do a better job in training them." Neal managed to convey both disarming innocence and shocked dismay in precisely the correct proportions to have everyone burst out laughing.

"Right, you're a regular Samaritan. Well, to spare the others from being fleeced entirely, let's call it quits for the week. It's close enough to five o'clock for me."

Responding to their enthusiastic thanks, Peter waved them off. "Just remember this next time I call you in on the weekend."

"Have any plans?" Neal asked Peter as they headed for the elevator.

"It's going to be a weekend of putting my feet up, watching baseball, and relaxing," Peter replied. "Elizabeth is out of town visiting her parents, so I won't have to fight her for the remote. She left me a long list of honey-does which I'll probably ignore, plus a well-stocked fridge which I'll definitely not ignore. How 'bout you?"

"Saturday classes for me. But this weekend is special. My baroque painting seminar—the one taught by Sherkov—is meeting at the Met. The Dutch Baroque Masters exhibit is currently going on and we'll be discussing some of the works. I will dazzle and amaze the group by lecturing on a painting by Vermeer, The Woman in Blue Reading a Letter. If you get bored of baseball, I could"
probably arrange for you to sit in.”

"Sorry but baseball and boredom are two words that never go together."

"Okay, DiMaggio, see ya Monday."


Neal arrived at the museum early. His seminar was scheduled to start at two o'clock, but he wanted to have some time to himself first. Being able to use his Columbia ID to get in free at the Met was a perk he never got tired of. And that his ID was not a forgery but genuine, how unbelievable was that? If his aunt Noelle hadn't finagled a way for him to apply by going through that monumental series of exams, it simply wouldn't have been possible. After all, he didn't even have a high school diploma, let alone a bachelor's. How'd he survived the torture of those exams still seemed like a miracle. He'd never crammed so hard in his life. Without Peter, he would have self-destructed.

Neal paused in the museum's Great Hall. He really should do more to thank Noelle and Peter. Wonder what they would think if he invited them to the grad school's Family Day? Neal grinned to himself. That could be fun. He'd have to look into it.

Neal headed up the main staircase to the second floor where the nineteenth and early twentieth century European paintings galleries were located. Old habits die hard. It was difficult not to take note of the fire escapes, the security cameras. Where were the guards stationed? How were the paintings attached to the walls? What were the likely escape routes? That process had become so natural, it was like breathing. Would that ever change? Maybe it shouldn't. After all, wasn't that part of what made him a valued consultant?

But now he needed to focus on why he'd come. His own works were going to be exhibited at the end of the year. Granted, not at the Met, but the art gallery at Columbia wasn't to be sneezed out. Sitting down on a bench in front of a Matisse still life, Neal pulled out his sketch pad. As he began to sketch, fire escapes, exams, and all other extraneous thoughts faded away. The crowd of visitors became inconsequential. He was in his own world. The Matisse, his pencils, and the paper were the only things that mattered . . . .

"Time to rejoin the seventeenth century!" No mistaking that booming voice. Neal looked around to see his advisor, Ivan Sherkov, grinning down at him. "I noticed you sketching on my way to the gallery. Think you can manage to pull yourself away?"

Glancing at his watch, Neal was astonished to see it was almost time for the seminar to begin. "Sorry, wouldn't want to be late—I've been looking forward to this," he said, hastily stowing his pencils and sketches.

Neal and Sherkov set off together for the Dutch Baroque Masters exhibit, which was housed in the special exhibition area next to the paintings wing. A long line of visitors was waiting to gain admittance, but they could bypass the crowd and walk through a side entrance. Space had been cordoned off for the seminar group.

There were ten students in his class. Five of them had been scheduled to speak, each one having selected a different painting on display. Neal spoke last:

"This painting by Vermeer depicts a young woman absorbed in reading a letter. Clad in a blue night jacket, all the other colors in the painting are secondary to its radiant lapis lazuli blue. The effects of light are extraordinary. Notice how the shadows on the wall are pale blue, and the woman's skin is painted with pale gray rather than flesh tones. As is typical with Vermeer, the
painting abounds in symbols and hidden meanings: the map, the pearl necklace on the table, the letter itself . . . ."

As he spoke, some of the museum visitors gathered in the back to listen. Neal enjoyed making a presentation. He fed off the reactions and facial expressions of his audience. As he talked, he surveyed not only his seminar group, but also the museum visitors standing behind them. The young couple holding hands, the elderly man with a beard, the Chinese teenager, the tall man in a turtleneck. Neal did a double take. Was that? Surely not. But he was the spitting image.

Neal finished his remarks and was kept busy answering questions posed by Sherkov and members of his group for several minutes. The first chance he had, he scanned the crowd, but he couldn't find him. Was it really him or just a freakish resemblance? Puzzling.

The seminar concluded, everyone gathered up their notebooks. Neal went back to his seat for his and that's when he saw it. A small origami leopard peeked out from his sketch pad. Neal pocketed it and after chatting with the other students for a few minutes headed off.

Once he was away from the exhibition crowd, he stopped to unfold the leopard. A short, hastily scrawled message was inside: "La Palette—5 p.m."

So it was him. How long has it been? Two years give or take. The last time was in Berlin, for the Nationalgalerie job. What a disaster that was—he had hoped that chapter of his life was closed forever. Did he really want to reopen it?

But two years is a long time. Klaus may have changed as much as he had. And wasn't it his duty to find out why he was in New York and particularly why he was at the Met? It would take finesse. Klaus knew him so well, he'd have to be en garde to give the impression that he was still the Neal he remembered. But this was a summons he simply couldn't ignore.

It was already 4:30 p.m. He'd have to hustle to make it.

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La Palette was a small bistro and wine bar on East 79th and Third Avenue. A local favorite, its walls were covered with contemporary art. The owner, an artist himself, had established a policy where an artist could offer a painting to the bistro, and if it were accepted the artist would get sixty percent off all tabs for as long as the painting was exhibited. Some paintings rotated out, but others stayed on permanent exhibition. Neal had one on permanent display and was good friends with the owner, Jacques Legault.

Promptly at 5 p.m., Neal strolled in and waved a breezy greeting to Jacques who was behind the bar. The bistro was already packed and most seats were taken. Glancing around, he saw a familiar face in the back. As he walked up, Neal didn't need to force the broad smile. "Welcome to my side of the pond, Klaus!"

"Neal, come over here!" Klaus exclaimed and gave him an enthusiastic hug. "It's been a while—too long!"

As they sat down at the table, Neal was able to get his first good look at him. Klaus hadn't changed much in the past two years. Tall, with sandy-brown hair, his steel-blue eyes looked as piercing as ever.

"Couldn't believe it was really you at the museum," Neal said. "Not that I'm not delighted to see you, but the Klaus I know used to proclaim loud and often that the New World was a plague to be
avoided. As I recall, 'a miasmic pit of bourgeois mediocrity' was your favorite expression for my home. What made you change your tune?"

"I may have been overly harsh," Klaus acknowledged with a grin. "Europe is becoming a bore and a change of scene has a certain appeal. This watering hole, for example, is not devoid of charm. It's very possible I may decide to stay a while." He beckoned a waiter over and ordered a bottle of Chateau Margaux and a cheese board. When the waiter left, he asked, "Isn't that your painting over the sideboard on the right?"

"You have a good eye," Neal said with a nod.

"Your talent was always easy for me to recognize."

Neal smiled. "I heard rumors that you were in Brussels recently. A Rubens was stolen from the Old Masters Museum there a couple of months ago. A very daring robbery, I'm told."

"Such a pity. That work was one of Ruben's finest and a huge painting. Whoever pulled it off must have been a genius," Klaus said smugly. "But what about you? I haven't heard anything about you in it must be over a year." He poured Neal a glass of wine. "I would have contacted you as soon as I arrived, if I'd known you were in town."

"I've been keeping a low profile," Neal explained. "Have a couple of long cons going."

"Two at once? You always were an over-achiever. Does one of them include lecturing at the Met?"

Neal spread some Camembert on a slice of bread. "I wondered when you were going to ask about that. That's a complicated one. Involves my posing as a grad student at Columbia." Changing the subject, Neal asked, "But what about you? What brought you to the Met?"

"That's one of the reasons I wanted to meet with you. When I saw you in the gallery, I couldn't believe my good fortune. You see I'm here for your painting, for The Woman in Blue."

"You're serious?"

"Quite serious. I have a buyer who has taken quite a fancy to that woman. In fact he's so infatuated with her that he's offered me substantially over what would be the standard price. That's what got me started thinking that I should expand my horizons."

"But to hit the Met—the risks are enormous."

"Of course, but that's what makes this doubly attractive. You can't fool me, Neal. I know how reckless you are. Were you planning to steal it yourself?"

Neal reached for another slice of French bread. "No, I have something else going."

"How about a little extracurricular activity? This won't take long, and since you're such an expert multitasker…"

Neal considered. What would be the best way to play this? It was essential to keep Klaus talking and find out what he was planning. "What do you have in mind?"

"I knew you'd be intrigued." Klaus swirled the wine in his glass, studying Neal. "I already have the job worked out, and the elements are in place, all except one that is. I need to have an expert forgery made of The Woman in Blue, one that will pass close inspection. No one can do that as well as you. I had someone else lined up, but the chance of working with you again . . ." and Klaus
gestured with his hand. "It would be just like the old days, bro. Are you interested?"

"Perhaps, but I'd need to know a lot more—exactly what you're planning and how it'll be executed."

"You're not thinking of Berlin, are you? This won't be like that, Neal, I promise you. I regret that as much as you do."

"I believe you, but still..." Neal sat back in his chair and steepled his fingers as he considered.

Klaus poured Neal another glass of wine. "You can stop the pretense. The Neal Caffrey I know couldn't resist a job like this. Naturally, the reward will be substantial. You know I'm always very generous."

Neal took a sip of his wine. "It's tempting, I'll grant you that. Can I let you know tomorrow?"

"That'll be acceptable, but no later. I can hold off till 10 a.m. But I know you'll make the right decision." Klaus smiled broadly as he clinked glasses. "Here's to renewing our partnership, bro!"

"To old friends—cheers!"

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Neal left the bistro shortly afterwards, having promised to call Klaus by 10 a.m. The street outside seemed quiet and peaceful compared to the boisterous revelry going on inside. The evening air was refreshingly cool. Taking a deep breath, Neal decided to walk home. He could have taken the subway, but it would be too bright and noisy for the mood he was in. Seeing Klaus had not been as straightforward as he had thought. Their conversation had brought back a flood of memories and feelings he hadn't expected and now somehow he had to make sense of them all.

Walking west past the Met, Neal entered Central Park. He knew the route through the park so well he didn't have to think about where he was going. When he arrived at Turtle Pond in the center of the park, he decided to linger. An owl could be heard off in the distance, its low hoots coming from the trees on the far side of the pond. The moon was reflected on the shimmering surface of the water. It was beautiful and peaceful. Looking into the pond, Neal let his mind journey back to Geneva where he'd first met Klaus, to the friendships, the heists...

The mansion was dark when Neal finally returned home. June was off visiting one of her daughters. Just as well—he was in no mood to talk. When he entered his loft, he emptied his backpack of sketch pad and notebook, pausing when he took out his sketches. Seemed like ages ago that he'd made them. He should be working on his exhibition pieces now, not reliving history. Or should he? He'd originally planned to spend part of Sunday at his studio at Columbia, and now?

Neal poured himself a glass of wine and sat at his table. Across from him was a print of The Woman in Blue propped up on his easel. He had put it there to work on his presentation, and now she was a constant reminder of Klaus's proposal.

Neal contemplated her as he sat. Swirling the wine in his glass, he revisited the conversation in the bistro and his history with Klaus. Klaus had said he knew what the old Neal was going to do. But how would the new Neal handle it?

Neal sat and drank and studied the painting. He'd said it was full of hidden meanings. Maybe the solution to his dilemma was also concealed inside. If the map on the wall in the painting was supposed to reveal the path to follow, it was too vague to decipher. What was contained in the letter she's reading? Did it have the answer?
Nothing else was working—he might as well ask her.

"Excuse me, but are you as confused as I am? And I thought this would be simple—hah! One thing at least is clear. I'm not working for Klaus again. I already made that decision when I renounced that life. I couldn't do that to Peter, and you wouldn't be very happy either. Some knight in shining armor I'd be. So you can go ahead and cross that one off your list.

"But what you don't realize is what a good friend Klaus was to me during a time when I was spinning out of control and badly needed help. Couldn't I simply turn him down and pretend I hadn't met him?

"But what would happen then, you ask? Klaus would steal you—you wouldn't like that like that I bet. If the theft were discovered, my team, including yours truly, would be called in to investigate, and I wouldn't like that. Klaus might be captured. I don't think the FBI knows of my connection to him, but Interpol might. In any case, if Klaus were questioned, his past history with me could come to light and I'd be charged as an accomplice.

"On the other hand, if Klaus did manage to escape having left a forgery in your place, the forgery would be discovered. Who knows who he would have hired, but certainly not someone who could do justice to you. I'd be the lead suspect, and for an inferior work. That sucks big time. Klaus would probably stay in New York, and so the nightmare would never end. Where would we end up? You'd be stolen and my life would be ruined. I think we can safely scrap that option."

Neal leaned forward and rested his chin on his hands as he considered the implications of what he'd just said. He was distilling it down to a few options and there weren't many left.

"What if I sold out Klaus and told Peter?" he addressed the painting once more. "Would I then be a Judas after everything Klaus had done for me? And even if I told Peter, we'd still know nothing about his plans. Even with my help, you'd still be stolen and the FBI wouldn't be able to catch him. You'd be lost to the world.

"How about if I work undercover and paint the forgery in order to catch him? That would give the FBI the best chance of success. Conning Klaus won't be easy. Still, the chance to paint the forgery and save you—now that would be a double play that Peter would like. That's what you want me to do, isn't it?"

Neal poured himself another glass of wine. Nothing like advice from a painting he thought ruefully. Wonder if she has any words of wisdom on how to tell Peter all this? Peter would probably rain fire and brimstones upon him for not having disclosed anything about Klaus during the confession he made for immunity. Would he even be trusted to go undercover? He might be suspected of conning the FBI in a devious scheme of double-cross.

Neal groaned and ran both hands through his hair. Lecturing himself to get a grip, he knew there was only one decision that made any sense. Let the consequences fall where they may.

Looking at his watch, he was surprised that it was only 10 p.m. He felt like he'd been up all night. At least he wouldn't be waking him up. He picked up his cell phone.

Notes: Thanks for reading! If you'd like to see a photo of The Woman in Blue by Vermeer as well as other visuals, visit The Woman in Blue board of our Caffrey Conversation Pinterest site at www.pinterest.com/caffreycon where both Penna Nomen and I pin illustrations and resources for
Penna and I share a blog, called Penna Nomen & Silbrith Conversation, at www.pennasilbrithconversation.blogspot.com where we post about our stories and adventures in writing.

The Caffrey Conversation AU begins with Caffrey Conversation (where Peter recruits Neal in 2003) by Penna Nomen. She and I both write stories. Our 'verse differs from canon in that Neal was never sent to prison and the characters are several years younger. The personalities of canon characters are the same.

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

Peter stretched his arms in satisfaction. What unbelievable baseball—six extra innings before it was decided. From his sprawled position on the couch, he looked over at El's photograph and smiled. She picked a good weekend to be away. She'd have given up on him hours ago.

He was startled to hear the buzzing of his cell phone. Ten o'clock. Probably El. Glancing at the display, he was surprised to see it was Neal instead.

"Hey, Neal, what's up? Calling about the game? Don't tell me you watched it. Maybe there's hope yet . . . Neal, you there?"

"Peter . . . I . . . sorry, forgot about the game. It still on?"

"No, it just ended." Peter sat up, game forgotten. Something wasn't right. "What's going on? You all right?"

"Yeah. It's just . . . something came up, and we need to talk. It's important or I wouldn't bother you. Can I come over?"

Peter didn't like the way Neal sounded on the phone. Whatever this "something" was, it was unsettling. "How about I come to your place? It's easier for me to drive over than you finding a cab at this hour."

"Sure, good idea. June's out. Security's off so use your key and come on up."

"All right, hang tight. Not much traffic this hour. I'll be there shortly."

"Thanks."

As Peter drove, he replayed the phone conversation in his mind, uneasy by the hesitation in Neal's voice. What the hell was going on? Everything had been fine on Friday. He had a class at the Met this afternoon. Had something happened there? Didn't seem likely. Damn it, he knew he'd turned off that radar too soon.

Peter pulled up at the Ellington mansion and went inside. There were only a few lights on downstairs. Upstairs, he found Neal's door ajar and entered after a quick knock, not waiting for an answer.

Neal was standing facing the terrace doors when he walked in. Peter noted the glass of wine and half-empty bottle on the table.

Turning around, Neal smiled a greeting and waved him to a chair. "Thanks for coming. Can I get you a beer?"

"Sure." Nodding over to the wine bottle, Peter added, "Guess I need to catch up."

"Got that taken care of. Plenty more being chilled." Handing him the beer, Neal sat down across from him and refilled his wine glass. Despite the lightness of his words, he looked worried, which was making Peter even more on edge.
Neal didn't seem particularly eager to talk. Peter felt like saying, *So I'm here. What gives?* but his gut was telling him to go slow. Looking around the loft, he said, "That the Vermeer you did your presentation on?"

Nodding, Neal said, "You could say she's the reason I called." He cleared his throat and added, "Something happened at the Met today. When I gave my talk, there was quite a crowd of visitors and some came over to listen to me. I recognized one of them . . . Have you heard of someone called the Leopard?"

"The art thief? Of course. He's been linked to some of the most spectacular art thefts in Europe. But virtually nothing is known about him, not even his name. I've read reports about some of his suspected robberies, but that's about it." Peter sat back in his chair and studied Neal who was looking at him uneasily. The Leopard has been on Interpol's most wanted list for as long as Peter could remember. "You said you recognized the Leopard. You know who he is?"

"His name is Klaus Mansfeld. He's German, headquartered in Geneva."

"And how do you know that?"

"I met him in Europe," Neal admitted and added after a pause, "Did some jobs for him."

Peter exhaled deeply and took a swig of his beer. "So you saw Klaus Mansfeld, the Leopard, at the Met?"

"But that's not all. When I finished my talk and went back to my seat, I found a message from him asking for a meeting. I only had a few minutes to get there. I didn't have time to contact you before, but I want you to know what went on." Putting down his wine glass and squaring his shoulders, Neal looked directly at Peter. "So, here it is. Klaus had me meet him at La Palette. It's a bistro on East 79th."

"Yeah, I'm familiar with it. Go on."

"Klaus told me he has a commission to steal a painting, specifically *The Woman in Blue*—the one that's on that easel."

Peter couldn't resist giving a low whistle. "The Leopard told you that?"

Neal nodded. "Klaus was casing the museum this afternoon. He said he couldn't believe it when he heard me lecturing on the same painting. Supposedly, he'd lined up someone else to make a forgery but when he saw me, he decided to offer me the job instead."

Peter put down his beer as he considered Neal's revelation. "What did you tell him?"

"That I'd think it over. He gave me until 10 a.m. tomorrow to let him know."

Peter went over his options. Throttling Neal for not telling him about the Leopard earlier was the first thing that came to mind. Berating him for not calling him before going to the meeting was surely not an overreaction. But glancing over at Neal sitting nervously across from him, he decided to save those very worthy actions for another time. "What do you want to do?"

"I haven't stopped thinking about this since he made the offer. If you want to catch him, the only way is for me to agree to work with him."

"Now hold on," Peter protested. "We know his name now. You're telling me we can't stop him unless you work for him?"
Neal shrugged. "There's a good reason why nothing's known about him. Klaus is brilliant. He doesn't make mistakes. He's not going to reveal what he's lined up unless I'm in on it. I don't think it's possible for you to stop him without having someone on the inside."

"Do you have any details of what he's planning?"

"No."

"Do you know where he's staying? Anything?"

"Nope, all I have for Klaus is a contact number. Probably a burner phone."

Peter couldn't help noticing how Neal kept referring to Mansfeld as Klaus. "Just how well do you know this guy?"

"I worked with him off and on for a couple of years beginning in 2001," Neal acknowledged. "During that time I became quite familiar with how he operates. I doubt his methods have changed much since then."

"Two years? And you didn't mention anything about him in the confession you gave?"

"I confessed to thefts I'd made while working with him and led you to the people who had bought them," Neal pointed out immediately. Peter suspected he'd already been bracing himself to be slammed over his omission. "I . . . just didn't mention his involvement."

Not very reassuring. Peter knew he hadn't confessed to everything, but why had he failed to mention someone as important as the Leopard? "Neal, I'm trying to understand, but you're going to have to give me more to work with. You hid your knowledge of the Leopard but now say you want to bring him down. What's going on?"

Neal huffed in frustration. "Isn't what I'm offering enough? An opportunity to bring down one of Interpol's most wanted fugitives?"

Peter shook his head. "No, not till I understand why you're so on edge about it. I'm not going to risk putting you in a situation where you might self-destruct."

Neal got up from the table and walked back to the terrace doors. Not answering, he looked out at the city lights. Peter waited patiently. He knew Neal—give him time, give him space and he'd eventually open up.

After a minute, Neal turned around and said, "You need to understand. Klaus isn't a Keller or an Adler, he's not evil. If you met him, you'd like him. He's a friend, Peter. He always treated me decently. I didn't mention him in my confession, because, frankly, no one asked. And then, he was in Europe, I was here in the States. He was out of the FBI's jurisdiction and I didn't figure our paths would cross again." He shrugged. "That's no longer the case."

"And you've been trying to figure out how to resolve this," Peter said. No wonder Neal was freaking out.

"Right. Klaus told me he wants to expand his operations and move here permanently. And I know what that means. We're going to collide all the time. I can't avoid this any longer. Unless we're able to stop him, this won't end, and this may be our only chance." Neal hesitated before adding, "It took me a while to call you because I wanted to be sure I could do it first. I didn't want to make the offer, unless I was confident I could make it work." He exhaled and sat back down.
"Now here's the main problem from my perspective," said Peter. "You're too close to this for me to send you in. Much as I would jump at the chance to take down the Leopard, I can't back you going undercover. We'll have to find another way."

Neal shook his head in exasperation. "There is no other way. I've been going over this from every angle I can think of, and the only way you're going to be able to catch him is if I work for him. Peter, I know I can make it work. It's what I do."

"All right, calm down. Suppose for a moment, I do agree and you accept the offer. How do you think it'll play out?"

"Once I make the call, Klaus and I will meet somewhere. He'll have set up a safe house. He'll want me to stay there while I work on the forgery."

"Oh, this just gets better and better. How will we communicate with you? Two-way receiver?"

He shook his head. "That won't work. Klaus's motto is trust but verify. He makes heavy use of the latest technology and adds a layer of security that's near impossible to break. He'll have monitoring equipment in place to detect any wireless signals. He'll have me hand over my phone, watch, and any other electronic gear." Neal stood up and started pacing. "But there is a way. I think I can convince him to let me go to my classes. He may have someone follow me, but someone on the team could pose as a member of the class and I could get a message to them."

"Are you sure Klaus trusts you? From what you say, it doesn't sound like he does."

Neal shrugged dismissively. "That's his standard operating procedure. He treats his inner circle and his extras the same way. He doesn't like to leave anything open to chance. That's one of the reasons he's never been caught, and the agencies don't even know his name."

"In that case, what makes you think he'd let you run off to Columbia for classes?"

Looking a little embarrassed, Neal said, "That was a standard joke when we worked together. Klaus used to give me no end of grief because I'd left school. He'd flaunt all his diplomas and rag me for only having fake ones. I could use that now. I expect that he'd have me followed, but he won't stop me."

Peter shook his head. "I'm still not convinced. Give me some time to think this through."

"Want another beer?"

"No, we both better switch to coffee. Why don't you get busy and make some and let me chew on this a while."

Neal nodded and prepared the coffee, leaving Peter alone to his thoughts. Funny—the tension that had been written all over Neal's face had been erased. He now seemed relaxed and at ease. Probably because he'd already made his decision and laid it out on the table. Now it was Peter's turn, and he could guarantee his tension wasn't going to ramp down anytime soon. Going through the options, he played out different scenarios in his mind. There wasn't a lot to work with but it was enough.

After handing Peter a mug of coffee, Neal went out to sit on the terrace. Peter studied him thoughtfully. It was gratifying that Neal had divulged as much as he had. He must have been concerned about how Peter would react. But the big question now was would he be capable of taking down a person he considered his friend? Not a situation Peter ever would have wanted Neal to have to face. But he had to admit it, the kid was right. All they had now was a name. Without
more knowledge of what the Leopard was planning, their chances of catching him were miniscule.

Several minutes later, Peter joined Neal on the terrace. "All right, for the record I still don't like this, but I do have to agree, you're our best and probably only shot at getting him. C'mon inside. We've got work to do."

Over the next couple of hours, Peter grilled Neal on every detail he could remember of how Mansfeld operated as they strategized likely scenarios. By 1 a.m. they had gone as far as they could. Neal would call Klaus and agree to do the job but try to hold off meeting with him till the afternoon. That would give Peter time to gather his team and put their plans into place.

Neal said, "One last thing I should mention. Mozzie's not in New York right now and... I'm glad. Just in case he comes back and contacts you, don't tell him anything about it."

"Does Mozzie know Mansfeld?"

"Not well, but yes. And Peter, he... wouldn't understand. If he's worried about me, tell him **brioche**. It's our code that I'm okay."

Peter smiled and nodded. "Figures. Don't worry. I'll keep him out of it." He added, "But, seriously, you're positive you can go through with this? Last chance, Neal. Once it's started, there's no going back."

Neal glanced at the painting and then back to Peter. "I am. This is what I signed up for after all—take down the stormtroopers, right, Han?"

Stormtroopers, huh? Well, he could play along. "You got it, Luke. And I'll be right there with you."

On the drive home, Peter reflected on what Neal had told him. Good thing he was so familiar with the route, he could drive the car on auto-pilot. This wasn't a skeleton Neal was hiding in the closet, it was a fully grown Tyrannosaurus Rex. And he'd just signed off on letting Neal go hang out in the closet with it.

Still, the chance to capture the Leopard—what an incredible opportunity. Merely putting the actual name to the thief was a victory. If they could somehow pull it off, the future of the White Collar task force would be secure. And it should lay to rest the whispers that persisted about bringing in a criminal to work there. Peter still overheard the occasional comments, not from his own agents fortunately, but in other units there was lingering distrust. And after a White Collar agent had been found guilty of working with Adler, there were some who blamed Neal. Despite his misgivings, he couldn't let this opportunity slip by. But he was also going to do everything he could to help Neal get through it.

Neal calling him Han—now that was out of left field. What on earth made him bring up Star Wars? But this wasn't the first time he'd seen Neal deflect tension by making a game out of it. **Tuesday Tails**, hadn't that originally started as a serious attempt to keep Neal under surveillance because the team was suspicious of him? Now it was part game/part training session. If channeling a movie helped Neal handle the stress of going after Mansfeld, he wasn't going to stand in the way.

**White Collar Division. September 19, 2004. Sunday morning.**

Peter arrived at the office early that Sunday morning to research the Leopard and Klaus Mansfeld. He also called in Tricia, Jones, and Diana. By 9 a.m. they had joined him in the conference room, and he briefed them on the events of the previous evening.

"Whoa. I'd heard of the Leopard at Quantico," Diana said, shaking her head in disbelief. "Never
thought I'd have the chance to help apprehend him."

"Ditto that," said Jones. "He's a legend. It's like going after the Joker."

"All right, save your rhapsodizing for later," Peter said, holding up his hand. "Right now he is just another stormtrooper to be caught." Tricia exchanged puzzled looks with Diana and Jones. "You heard me right," Peter added. "We're calling this Operation Stormtrooper, so get used to it."

This is the face of the Leopard." Peter projected a photograph on the display screen. "Klaus Mansfeld. Thirty-five years old. German nationality. His family runs one of the largest investment firms in Germany. Their clients are primarily corporations with some wealthy individuals. Needless to say, the family itself is immensely wealthy. Mansfeld works as an investment advisor for the firm. His wife of seven years filed for divorce last year. No children."

"It's an excellent cover for his extracurricular activities," Tricia commented. "I wonder how many of his clients also have bought items he's stolen."

Peter nodded. "We should look into it." His cell phone vibrated. It was Neal.

"It's on. I put off the meeting as long as I could. I'm to be at La Palette at one o'clock."

"That'll give us plenty of time. Were you able to get any details?"

"A few. It's as we discussed. I'm bringing a bag to La Palette and will be working out of his place. Don't know the location yet. The job is planned for next Saturday. The forgery must be finished by Friday. I talked to him about Columbia and he's agreed to let me go to classes."

"Good—this gives us something to work with. I'll contact Sherkov and make the arrangements. Next contact will be Monday evening. And Neal . . . be careful."

"Aren't I always?"

Turning back to the others, Peter said, "Show time's at 1 p.m. at La Palette, a bistro on East 79th. Here's what I propose . . . ."


By twelve o'clock Peter, Tricia and Diana were already in position, sitting in separate unmarked cars which were parked across the street from La Palette. Tricia and Peter were pointed in opposite directions on East 79th and Diana was on Third Avenue. Peter didn't think the odds were high any of them would be able to follow Neal and Mansfeld when they left, but it was worth an attempt. Jones had drawn the plum assignment. He'd gone into the bistro and was settling down to brunch and *The New York Times.*

At 12:45 a black Mercedes SUV pulled up to the bistro and Klaus Mansfeld got out. No problem recognizing him, but the photos hadn't captured his easy self-confidence and air of authority. *This man is dangerous,* Peter thought to himself. After a brief scan up and down the street, Mansfeld sauntered into the bistro.

Fifteen minutes later Neal arrived by taxi. He removed his bag from the trunk and disappeared inside. Peter's frustration began to escalate. This was not the way he liked to conduct an op. With no earpiece and no receiver, he was flying blind. "Jones, Caffrey just entered the bistro. What are you seeing?"

"He's joined Mansfeld at a table not far from mine," Jones muttered in a low undertone, "but
unfortunately they're speaking German, so I'm not going to be much help. Wait, Mansfeld just pulled out an electronic device. Looks like a wireless detection finder. He set it down on the table. Checking to see if Caffrey's transmitting any signals, I bet. Caffrey appears to be teasing him about it. He was right. This guy doesn't take any chances. Too much background noise to record anything from where I'm sitting. Don't think I could get close enough to record their voices without raising suspicion… A waiter's bringing over two espressos."

A few minutes later, Jones reported, "Someone just walked up. About 50, short gray hair, medium height and build. He's wearing an apron. Maybe the chef or the owner? Apparently knows Caffrey who's introducing him to Mansfeld. Crap, they're speaking French now. What is this, the U.N.? Mansfeld and Caffrey got up and walked over with the other guy to the east wall. Stopped by some paintings. Must be discussing them."

At 1:30 Jones gave the heads-up. "Get ready, they're moving out."

Neal and Mansfeld left the bistro a few minutes later, with Mansfeld carrying Neal's bag. The two were engaged in animated conversation, both appearing relaxed and friendly. The same black Mercedes rolled up and they sped off. Diana was in the best position to track them. Peter and the others waited in place for her signal.

Several minutes later she called in. "Sorry, Boss, I lost them in traffic on FDR Drive."

"It was a long shot, don't worry about it," said Peter. At least they had the license number.

Back at the office, Tricia ran the plates. As suspected, it was for a rental car. The customer had used a New York driver's license, which turned out to be a fake. A dead end—not surprising, but they had to try.

Peter sent the team home to salvage what was left of their Sunday, and he headed back to Brooklyn. El was coming home later in the day, and he hadn't had a chance to clean up from the baseball marathon of the previous day. Giving a yawn, he realized how tired he was. Better catch up on some sleep himself. Monday he'd need to be on point. Neal was in the Leopard's lair now.

Notes: Thanks for reading and for your comments! In next week's chapter we'll get a glimpse of life inside the Leopard's lair. Special thanks to Penna Nomen for her help with this chapter.

Blog: Penna Nomen & Silbrith Conversation: www.pennasilbrithconversation.blogspot.com
Chapter Visuals: The Woman in Blue board at the Caffrey Conversation Pinterest website: www.pinterest.com/caffreycon

On Sunday evening, Peter spread out Mansfeld's case file on the dining room table while Elizabeth finished unpacking upstairs. From the sounds emanating from the bedroom, Satchmo was being his usual helpful self and was overjoyed to have his mistress back. He was almost as happy as Peter. The pot roast had been a triumph, if he did say so himself. She had been very complimentary, though she no doubt would have been equally effusive over anything he had managed to pull together. Perhaps it was time to invest in a cookbook for clueless husbands.

He went into the kitchen to get a beer from the fridge and on his return found Elizabeth looking at Mansfeld's photo. "So this is the Leopard?" she asked.

"That's him. And what does your astute mind deduce from his photo?"

"Hmm. The women of New York better watch out. He looks like a German Brad Pitt." Quirking a smile at Peter's eye-rolling, she added, "Why is he called the Leopard?"

"From the business card he leaves behind. The card's imprinted with the image of a leopard on a tree branch. No text. We believe the card is only left occasionally, as there have been many cases which fit his M.O. where no card was found. He's also been suspected in thefts where forgeries replaced the genuine items and were only discovered much later."

Elizabeth sat down next to him. "Is Neal in trouble because he didn't mention him during his confession?"

"No, I don't think so. When I tell Hughes tomorrow what we're doing, he'll be so excited at the thought of catching the Leopard, he won't be concerned about what Neal omitted in his confession."

Elizabeth reached over and smoothed his forehead. "Then what's causing those worry lines?"

"You know, the standard stuff, Neal . . ." he said with a groan. "He's offered to do what every agent dreads most—take down a friend. I don't think he understands how difficult it will be. So that's one problem with this case. The other is the length of the con. Normally a con only has to be maintained for a short period of time. Neal will be living in the same house and having to maintain his cover the entire time. He's an expert but even so that may be asking too much. And then there's the very real possibility he may fall back under Mansfeld's or should I say 'Brad Pitt's' spell. Want me to go on?"

"No, I get the idea. How do you plan to counteract that?"

"We're keeping in touch through his classes at Columbia. Mansfeld's allowing him to go, and we'll take full advantage of that. Those classes are the only relief he's going to have from the con and our only means to communicate."

"And your best chance to balance all those mind games you fear are going on."

"Right, but as you well know, psychological games aren't my strength. Any suggestions?"

"Try to lighten the atmosphere whenever you can. That'll help reduce the stress. Remind him of all those who care about him on the other side. Don't let the dark side seduce him away."
"Dark side, how'd you know?" Peter said with a chuckle. "Neal talked about going after stormtroopers. Even referred to me as Han."

El laughed. "Running a con is a lot like acting. Since I started trying my hand at acting with Park Community Players, I've noticed that I handle situations differently. Now when I have to cater an event for someone I don't like, I imagine the person to be a character in a movie or a play, and it makes it a lot more enjoyable. I bet Neal has had a very difficult time convincing himself to pull a con on a friend, so he's recasting it." She paused and tilted her head as she studied him. "Neal may be on to something. I can see you as Han Solo. You do have a bit of the scoundrel under that FBI exterior."

Peter wrapped his arm around her. "Scoundrel, hmm, I like the sound of that. Why, Leia, you're trembling. Interested in a little acting practice?"


Neal lay in bed reveling in the seductive feel of the silk sheets. He had stayed up late last night painting and was in no hurry to get up now. Instead he could laze in bed while reflecting on the events of the previous day. The townhouse Klaus was using was luxurious beyond measure. Antiques, art—how much time and money had been spent furnishing it? The place reminded him of Klaus's home in Geneva.

What an impression Klaus had made on him back then. Neal had never experienced luxury on the princely scale Klaus indulged in. But he quickly adapted. And now it was back, handed to him on a gold platter.

When they arrived at the townhouse on Sunday, Klaus introduced him to the two other residents, showed Neal to his room and studio, and then left him alone. He understood that Neal would want to spend time familiarizing himself with his surroundings on his own.

The studio—what a studio—was the entire top floor. Equipped with every supply imaginable, skylights in the ceiling, immense windows, it was breathtaking. Prominently displayed were prints of *The Woman in Blue*, produced with different filters to capture different color ranges. Authentic pigments of the period were already at his disposal. It was a forger's heaven. And there was even a niche with couch and overstuffed armchairs and a wet bar for down time.

Neal had worked late into the night, stopping only briefly for dinner. Klaus had prepared the meal: classic French cuisine, of course, with a superb selection of wines. The dinner conversation was not about the heist, but instead on the contemporary European art scene.

Neal learned a little about the others. He only knew their first names: Marta and Jacek. They were young electronics specialists, probably Czech. Unusual to have a husband and wife together on a job. Klaus had spent most of the day closeted with them in the basement, a high-tech hub of electronics. It was off limits to Neal who'd only gotten a brief glimpse of it when Klaus gave him the tour.

Instead Neal spent the day on *The Woman in Blue*, studying her and making preliminary sketches. It was unnerving how much he thought about her. Normally he didn't show that level of obsession, and it was disconcerting to find himself conducting a running conversation with her in his head. What did she think of Klaus? Her new surroundings? How did she want Neal to paint her? Was he doing the right thing?

He lingered in bed until the sound of the piano downstairs brought him back to reality. It was a sonata by Schubert, a sure sign Klaus was up. Coffee and croissants were waiting for him
downstairs, *The Woman* beckoned. Time to embrace the moment.

**White Collar Division. Monday morning.**

As soon as he arrived at work, Peter filled Hughes in on the Leopard. As he'd expected, Hughes's eyes gleamed at the prospect, his normally cool exterior melting enough to display the excitement of capturing the renowned art thief. They decided to restrict information to Peter's key players and not inform Interpol. It was too sensitive to risk any leaks.

"Any worries about Caffrey?" Hughes asked. "Do you think he'll be able to maintain his cover?"

Peter hadn't told Hughes about the extent to which Neal had worked with the Leopard. Did he have worries? Oh, yeah, big time. But probably not the ones Hughes was thinking of. "Caffrey's an expert. If anyone can pull this off, he can," he replied confidently.

"All right, keep me informed and let me know when you need additional resources. We can't lose this opportunity, Peter."

Peter and his team spent the day collecting all the information they could find both on the Leopard and on Klaus Mansfeld. Their attempts to correlate the movements of the two proved to be exceedingly difficult, however. The Leopard had been rumored to be responsible for heists going back for over a decade, but since nothing had ever been proven, it was impossible to know which ones he had actually committed and which ones were smoke and mirrors. Klaus Mansfeld, on the other hand, had an extensive list of clients throughout Europe: corporations, foundations, and the privileged rich. He was constantly traveling, but his meetings were confidential and difficult to trace.

It was the perfect cover for an art thief, Peter had to acknowledge. Tricia was undoubtedly right that some of his clients were also buyers of his stolen art. But there were so many clients and so many trips and meetings, that sorting through them to find a pattern was frustratingly difficult.

Midday, Peter called up Neal's advisor, Ivan Sherkov. Fortunately Sherkov was already familiar with Neal's work at the FBI, and he had met Peter during the Fabergé egg case a few weeks ago. Sherkov readily agreed to what Peter had in mind and was enthusiastic to be involved in an FBI op. Perhaps too excited. He was already suggesting "enhancements." Keeping a lid on him could be almost as challenging as restraining Neal.

That afternoon while the others researched Mansfeld's clients, Peter holed up in his office with the Mansfeld and Leopard timelines. He pulled out the confession Neal had made to gain immunity and scoured it for any common denominators. There were a few possibilities—an art heist in Zurich and a stolen manuscript in Milan were the likeliest. Hopefully when they brought Mansfeld to trial, it wouldn't be necessary to delve into his earlier crimes to get a conviction. Peter didn't want to even think about putting Neal on the stand to testify about them.

Mid-afternoon, Jones knocked on Peter's door. "You'd asked me to monitor Neal's voicemail here. He got a call at 11 a.m. from a Sara Ellis. She said she'd tried his cell phone, and would try again later. Want me to do anything about this?"

"Thanks, Jones. I know Sara," Peter said. "I'll give her a call."

At four o'clock Peter called it a day and headed home. Time for a wardrobe consult with El before the evening's activity.

**Schermerhorn Hall, Columbia University. Monday evening.**
At 6:30 p.m. the students attending Sherkov's Dutch baroque painting seminar started drifting into the seminar room and taking their seats around a large round table. Peter had arrived early to go over the arrangements with Sherkov. He'd pulled out a folder with papers and pretended to work on them while keeping track of the students coming in.

They were an eclectic group: a mixture of what he would label artsy types with people who looked like they had come from work. When Neal arrived, he took a seat across the table from Peter. Giving him a brief smile, Neal took out a sketch book and began sketching rapidly.

A blonde dressed in a business suit and carrying a cup of tea took a seat next to Neal and started chatting with him. She looked younger than the way she was dressed. They continued talking while Neal sketched. Apparently good friends. Another reason Neal enjoyed this seminar so much? She seemed—hold on . . . was he channeling El? Yes, her sly matchmaking mind would be in high gear right now. Inwardly groaning, Peter brought his mind back to the task at hand.

At seven o'clock Sherkov started the proceedings. "Before we begin, I'd like to introduce our guest for the evening, Dr. Peter Burkowski. Professor Burkowski is visiting us from the art history department of the University of Pennsylvania and has asked to sit in. Our subject for the evening I know will be of special interest to him. We will focus on Utrecht Caravaggism and also explore Gerrit Dou's trompe l'oeil paintings."

The lively discussion that followed might as well have been conducted in Dutch as far as Peter was concerned since he was lost after the first five minutes. Sherkov encouraged vigorous debate. He projected paintings on the screen and asked what Peter gathered were provocative questions and then sat back while the students had at it.

Neal was one of the liveliest—no shock there. Apparently he liked to propound off-the-wall opinions, or at least that's what they were, judging from the reactions of the others. It was all highly informal. Students walked around and went up to the screen to point out features. A coffee bar was set up on a side table and was heavily used.

Peter's mind wandered off as he looked at a Brugghen painting that was being discussed. He propped his elbows on the table and rested his chin on his hands. How would Brugghen have painted a baseball game or maybe Babe Ruth? How would he have captured the light at Yankee stadium?

"I'd like to hear Dr. Burkowski's opinion on the chiaroscuro evident in this work," Neal spoke up innocently.

Shooting daggers at him, Peter cleared his throat, but Sherkov interrupted what no doubt would have been a very enlightening comment.

"Excellent question, Neal, but I'm afraid Dr. Burkowski's time is limited. I was just about to suggest you give him a summary of what we've studied so far. You can use the room next door while the rest of us continue. Hopefully I can arrange to have Dr. Burkowski speak at a later time."

Turning to the blonde, Sherkov continued, "Fiona, what's your opinion on the chiaroscuro?"

Neal and Peter got up, stopping for coffee refills, and moved down the hall.

"Pleasure to meet you, Dr. Burkowski," Neal said with a grin. "I wasn't sure who would show up."

"Hey, I wasn't gonna miss out on a chance to see you as a student."

Neal opened the door to the classroom next door and beckoned Peter in. Sliding into a chair at the
"I was followed when I came here. That was expected. No one I know—Klaus hires outside experts to do surveillance. We shouldn't leave together."

"I've already arranged with Sherkov that he and I will walk back to his office afterwards so as to not raise any flags."

"That's good. I have the townhouse location for you," and he wrote down an address on East 89th Street. "Klaus has taken over the entire townhouse. There are two other people staying with us. We haven't had much of a chance to talk and I only know their first names: Marta and Jacek. Married, Czech I believe. Look to be about my age. Here—I made sketches before class started and wrote down their heights and other characteristics."

"So that's what you were working on."

He nodded. "I didn't want to take a chance of sketching them at the townhouse. Both are electronics experts. Klaus has some amazing miniaturized gear. They must be planning to use the equipment for the heist, but I don't know how."

"Do you have any details about the how the heist will be conducted?"

"Klaus hasn't revealed anything to me, except that it's going to be on this coming Saturday. All I've been told is that I won't be involved in the robbery itself."

"That's good news. I'll breathe a lot easier once you've left that place."

Neal chuckled. "Figured you'd say that. I dunno—I'm going to miss those silk sheets and croissants."

"Now I know for sure we need to extract you."

"Killjoy," Neal said, making a face. "I'll try to find out as much as I can about the heist before I leave."

"Be careful," Peter warned. "From what you've said, Mansfeld is on high alert. We can't afford to raise any suspicions."

"You know me, Peter. 'Cautious Caffrey', that's what they call me."

"I wish." Out in the hall the sounds of conversation and opening doors alerted Peter that the seminar had ended. "Before you leave, anything else you can tell me?"

Neal thought a moment. "Klaus confirmed he's planning to set up operations in the States. This isn't simply a side trip. He's bored with Europe and looking for new thrills. This townhouse he has—from the way it's been furnished, I think it's going to be his new home base."

"We'll stop him," Peter said confidently. "The Leopard's no match for the FBI."

"Take out the bad guys, that's us." Putting away his sketch book, Neal added, "Time for me to shove off and return to the Death Star."

"All right, but I'll be here on Thursday for your Egyptian art class."

"Better bone up on your hieroglyphics," Neal warned.

"Can it be worse than what I just sat through?" Peter scoffed and was dismayed to see Neal's sly smile in response. Peter was at the door when he remembered. "Almost forgot to mention. Sara
Ellis called you today."

"Really?" Neal said, raising an eyebrow.

"She left a message at the office, said she'd tried your cell phone last night. I called her back. Told her you were away on assignment but would get back to her next week."

As Neal left Schermerhorn Hall, he watched for his tail to reappear. Things were looking up. It had been a good talk with Peter. Sara had called. She seemed capable of taking out a stormtrooper or two. Had anyone had ever called her Princess Leia? He'd have to try it sometime and then run for cover.

Smiling to himself, Neal no longer felt the necessity to return immediately to the townhouse. It was time to tweak the Leopard's tail.

All those Tuesday Tail training sessions he had conducted with the White Collar team had kept him on top of his game and now he'd take advantage of it. Catching sight of his tail, Neal circled back through the campus. Ducking into a side street, he waited till his quarry passed and then began tailing him as the tail searched for Neal. Every few minutes he'd let himself be spotted only to disappear again. But after 45 minutes the game was becoming old, and the hapless victim not challenging enough to make it worth his while. Taking pity on him, Neal let him catch up and then headed for the subway. At least he wouldn't give him the excuse of traveling back to the townhouse in style.

On the ride back, Neal's thoughts returned to *The Woman*. There was still so much left to do, he felt like he had just scratched the surface of where he needed to go. Peter was worried about him spending so much time with Klaus. What Peter failed to realize was that when he was painting, he could shut Klaus, the heist, and everything else out. It was if they didn't exist. And now it was time to get back to her.

It was 10:30 when Neal got back to the townhouse. Lights were on in the basement. Marta and Jacek must still be working. He stopped off in his room to change and then went to the studio. When he entered, he saw Klaus waiting for him. Lounging in a leather chair with a snifter of cognac, Klaus looked over at him as he entered. "You can't con me, Neal."

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*Notes: Thanks to my amazing beta reader Penna Nomen for her many excellent suggestions for this chapter. Tweaking the Leopard's tail was one of them.*

*Blog: Penna Nomen & Silbrith Conversation: [www.pennasilbrithconversation.blogspot.com](http://www.pennasilbrithconversation.blogspot.com)*

*Chapter Visuals: The Woman in Blue board at the Caffrey Conversation Pinterest website: [www.pinterest.com/caffreycon](http://www.pinterest.com/caffreycon)*
Cat and Mouse


Neal slapped on a look of innocent bewilderment as he sat down in a chair across from Klaus. He’d arrived home from his evening class with every intention to resume his work on the Vermeer forgery. Finding Klaus lying in wait for him in the studio and then to be accused of conning him, that was just rude.

But he might as well take advantage of it—time to tweak the Leopard himself.

"What's this all about?" Neal asked. "I leave for a couple of hours and you let the paint fumes get to you? I hope you don't think I'd be dumb enough to con you."

"Not me, con yourself perhaps," Klaus said, looking pointedly at him. "It's been bothering me ever since La Palette. Telling me these classes are part of some long con you're pulling, really," and he shook his head disapprovingly. "I know you too well for that. You wouldn't leave a painting at the stage this one was in if it weren't for something extremely important. It's time to come clean and don't even try the innocent act with me. Go ahead and admit it—you've enrolled at Columbia and are officially in their graduate school program. And I must say it's highly gratifying to learn that all the effort I spent lecturing you to pursue a degree finally paid off and you saw the wisdom of my words. But why not come out and tell me? That's what I don't understand. You should be proud of it."

Neal laughed and helped himself to a glass of cognac. "All right, you got me. But after the grief you gave me in Geneva, it's not that easy to admit you were right and I was wrong. And when I started classes, honestly the whole situation seemed so unreal that it was simpler to think of it as a con. Then, if things fell apart, it wouldn't be such a big deal."

"They're not going to fall apart," Klaus said decisively. "You're going to be a brilliant success; of that I have absolutely no doubt. What I still have to hammer into your thick skull is that it was because of the potential I saw in you that I was giving you such a hard time. When you graduate, you'll thank me for all the browbeating I inflicted upon you. Of course, back then I was insisting on the Sorbonne. That may have been the wrong milieu. Columbia, on the other hand, is ideal."

Klaus's eyes flashed with excitement. "You realize the timing is perfect?"

"How so?"

"Just when I decide to move my operations to New York, you're immersing yourself in the world of New York art. You have to join me! We were such a team in Europe. Your abilities were unparalleled back then and now they're only better. This Vermeer you're doing," and Klaus gestured at the painting, "it's magnificent. The finest work I've seen you do. In the States there will be no stopping us."

"But why are you abandoning Europe? The risks are higher here. Does Chantal want you to relocate?"

"You didn't hear? Chantal and I broke up. It happened a year ago. I suppose there's no way you would have known. Not my call. She was the one who left me."

"I'm sorry, man." Neal's sympathy was genuine. He liked Chantal. She brought out the compassionate side in Klaus and appealed to his better nature. He wondered if that wasn't the real
reason Klaus was moving to New York. "Any chance for a reconciliation?"

"I wish, but I don't think so. She changed, Neal. She wasn't the Chantal you remember. She opened a restaurant in Paris and didn't want to be involved with jobs any more. That didn't bother me, but she wanted me to give up my life, settle down, have kids . . . I wouldn't do it."

"But I thought you two were made for each other," Neal persisted. "I don't mind telling you I was jealous of what you had. And I can see you as a father—you'd be great at it. Perhaps a little too strict, but—"

Wagging his finger at Neal, Klaus interrupted, "Just because I kept you from flaming out, don't think I could do that with my own kid. No, I'd be bored to tears if I gave up my life. And I have no interest in bringing little Mansfelds into the world. I'll let my brother take care of that."

"I can understand why you want to leave Europe, but I have to warn you. The FBI is no slouch. Some of their agents are the toughest I've ever encountered. They're relentless—can make your life miserable. I've had them breathing down my back for years and had to go abroad to escape. Europe is your playground. Why give it up?"

Klaus stared at Neal in disbelief. "What's come over you? This doesn't sound like the Neal Caffrey I know."

Swirling his cognac, Neal took his time answering. "I had what I thought was my Chantal. I was convinced she was the one—the love of my life." Giving a small bitter laugh he added, "I got played. Took me a long time to realize it, but she wasn't who I thought she was. It didn't end well, but at least it's over." He held up a hand as Klaus started to interrupt. "I have zero desire to rehash the past, but what happened made me reconsider just who I am. What you had with Chantal was rare. From my perspective, you had the dream that I was hoping to attain. I didn't have a choice, but you may still be able to salvage your relationship."

He shrugged. "Water under the bridge now. It was bound to happen sooner or later, and she never would have come to the States with me."

"Don't you ever think of changing directions?"

"Never. It's in our blood, Neal. Coded into our DNA. You're the same way, though you may not realize it yet. We're brothers, and once you accept that, your life will be a lot less complicated. But I want to make it clear—I do understand what you're going through. A woman can tear you apart, make you question everything, stomp on everything you hold sacred."

Neal didn't say anything but simply nodded.

Klaus continued in a softer tone. "I'm glad you told me about your Chantal. I'd wondered. You seem different, but now it all makes sense. We'll have to form a broken hearts club, grieve into our wine." He paused and grinned mischievously. "Want me to play some Schumann Lieder for you on the piano? You could sing. We'd—"

"That does it—outta here! The Woman calls to me." He got up with a laugh and moved over to the supply cabinet to retrieve his paints.

After Klaus left, Neal looked back to the doorway. All in all, that had gone well. He knew Klaus would be intrigued about his classes. Letting him figure it out rather than admitting up front that Columbia was legit allowed Klaus to bask in his own superiority.

Klaus reveled in his role of big brother. Playing up his own questions and insecurities cemented
that bond. There was no way now that Klaus would object to Neal going to classes the rest of the week. And any differences between the old Neal and new Neal, Klaus would pass off as the aftereffects of his wrecked love life.

Neal got his paints out, but his thoughts kept returning to Klaus. It was hard not to feel for the guy. Neal knew he was being reckless to voice his own concerns and to encourage him to go back to Chantal, but he had to make certain there was really no other option. Why couldn't Klaus be like Byron? He'd put aside his illegal activities for June. Klaus could have had it all with Chantal—love, family . . .

*What do you think?* he asked the painting. *You've met him now. You have to admit, he can be quite charming. It's hard to not feel like a heel for trapping him like this. You may like me, but I don't think I'll like myself very much when this is over.*

**WCWCW**

When Peter returned home from Columbia on Monday evening, he called the night shift at the Bureau to begin round-the-clock surveillance on the townhouse. By 10 p.m. the surveillance had already begun.

On Tuesday morning the full game plan was set into motion. A surveillance van was rejected as being too obvious; instead a surveillance team was installed in a vacant apartment in the building across the street from the townhouse. Agents had been divided into shifts under Jones' command to tail anyone leaving the townhouse. This was a golden opportunity to see if all the practice from nine months of Tuesday Tails had paid off.

Other members of the task forces were assigned the daunting task of tracking down the identities of the two electronics specialists, Marta and Jacek. They were hoping to eventually obtain photographs of them which would enable identification through facial recognition analysis.

Peter spent the morning reviewing security procedures with museum officials. The security measures implemented at the Met had recently been revamped, and the officials were confident that their system would prevent any theft. They weren't as elaborate as one might expect—no metal shutters to close off passageways unfortunately. But they made heavy use of security cameras and sensor devices. Promising their full cooperation, officials worked with Peter on setting up a mobile command station within the museum.

Late in the afternoon, Peter met with Tricia, Jones, and Diana for a progress report. It had been a long day. They called in for sandwiches since no one had gotten a lunch break.

"Tricia, what have we found out about the townhouse?" Peter asked.

"It turned out to be a black box. When we first saw it, the large windows looked like a gift. We thought we'd be able to observe what was going on inside. But the windows are all made of a special glass which makes it impossible to view the interior. We were more successful in discovering who owns the townhouse—an electronics corporation registered in Switzerland."

Peter sighed. "The strict Swiss privacy laws will prevent us from finding out much about them."

"Electronics is the perfect cover for an operation like this," Jones commented. "Mansfeld could have had all the electronics equipment they require brought in legally."

"Has anyone left the townhouse?" Peter asked.

"Glad you asked," Jones said as he reached for a sandwich. "I was able to pull off a real world
Tuesday Tail. Around 11 a.m., hit the jackpot when the Leopard himself left the townhouse. I tracked him to La Dordogne on East 85th Street. He entered the premises, stayed for about ten minutes, and then returned straight home."

Peter racked his memory. "I've heard of that place."

Diana spoke up. "It's a five-star French restaurant, just about the most prestigious in Manhattan."

"That's where I heard about it. El's mentioned it. Isn't it the one with murals of prehistoric cave art on the walls?"

"That's the place," Tricia confirmed. "It has what must be the most expensive menu in town."

"So now we know Mansfeld likes expensive French restaurants," said Peter. "Anything else?"

"Of course." Tricia nodded with a smile at Diana. "When Jones told us what he discovered, Diana and I ran a Wally Burns."

"Who's Wally?" asked Peter.

"Not who, Boss, but what," replied Diana. "You must have missed Neal's lesson. A Wally Burns is when you send in someone to distract so you can access information. In this case, Tricia and I entered the restaurant about thirty minutes after Mansfeld left. We figured the only reason Mansfeld could have gone at that hour was to make reservations. I diverted the manager by discussing plans for a dinner party which allowed Tricia to sneak a look at the reservations book."

Tricia concluded triumphantly, "I discovered an Erik Liedermann has made reservations for a private room located in the wine cellar for Wednesday evening, four people at seven o'clock. It has to be Mansfeld. The book showed the times when the reservations were made, and this was the only one that had been made during the period Mansfeld was in the restaurant."

Peter congratulated his three agents. "Neal will be proud of his students."

"Caffrey's a good teacher," Jones admitted. "Better not tell him I said so though. He's already cocky enough."

"When will you meet with Neal next?" asked Tricia.

"Not till Thursday evening," said Peter. "In the meantime, let's turn what we know about La Dordogne to our advantage. When the Leopard returns to his water hole, we'll be ready for him."


Putting down his brush, Neal stepped back to study his painting. He had stayed up late the previous night and only had a few hours of sleep before returning to her. She was coming together but there was still so much to do. With each layer of paint more new layers of depth and complexity opened up. "You're starting to reveal your secrets," he told her softly.

"Can you drag yourself away? Even starving artists eat occasionally I'm told."

Wheeling around, he saw Klaus standing at the doorway. How long had he been there? Neal hadn't even heard him approach.

"You're becoming as pale as she is, and I gotta tell you, translucent gray skin works much better on her than you, bro. C'mon downstairs. Dinner's on and the others are waiting."
Walking down the stairs with him, Neal sniffed appreciatively. "What's that delicious aroma?"

"My supplier had received a shipment of excellent North Atlantic sea scallops. You're in for a treat. I made Chantal's Coquilles St. Jacques. She and I may have split, but I still have her recipes." He gave Neal a sly smile. "I never was able to determine if you joined us in Geneva because of my expertise, Chantal's safecracking talents, or her cooking."

"Definitely her cooking. I must have gained ten pounds that first month, but it was gastronomic heaven."

Marta and Jacek were already at the dining room table, and Jacek was pouring a bottle of Puligny Montrachet into glasses. Over dinner, Klaus went over some of the details for the heist. "When do you think the painting will be done?" he asked Neal.

"Another day should do it. I'd like to spend Thursday morning making a final check then it will be ready to age."

"Perfect." Turning to Jacek, Klaus asked, "How are the devices coming?"

"Marta's going to test them tomorrow at the museum. We anticipate everything will work flawlessly. That software program is incredible. We've run countless tests in our lab and have been amazed at how—"

"Enough!" Klaus held up a hand and laughed, "You know Neal and I aren't fluent in technospeak. I trust you completely. If you say they're ready, that's good enough for me. And now, I think a celebration is in order. Everything has come together so smoothly, we've earned some time off. Wednesday evening we're going out. La Dordogne was recommended to me. We should give something back to the local economy."

"La Dordogne—that's the most exclusive French restaurant in Manhattan!" Neal said.

"So I gathered," Klaus said with satisfaction. "Get used to this, Neal. Your lean times are over, bro."

"I'll need to go back to my place and get some clothes."

"Not necessary. That's already been taken care of."


On Wednesday morning, using the ruse of a surprise city food inspection, task force members mounted surveillance cameras in the room reserved by Mansfeld aka Liedermann. The cams were secreted in the wine racks. Peter told El he'd be working late that night. Hopefully this would provide the breakthrough they needed. Up to now, there had been minimal activity at the townhouse and little to show for all the surveillance efforts. One visit in the morning came from an unexpected source: a delivery from an expensive men's clothing store. But other than that and a couple of grocery deliveries, Mansfeld had been the only person they'd seen.

In the afternoon, their luck turned. Marta was observed leaving the townhouse and they were able to follow her to the Met. She spent a couple of hours going through the exhibits, including the one on Dutch Baroque Masters. There was nothing suspicious in her behavior. She had rented an audio tour guide to use during the museum which could have masked her use of other electronic surveillance equipment. But now they had photographs of her. Diana had tailed her in the museum and was also able to lift her fingerprints from the tour guide. When they ran the prints, they got a match to Marta Kolar, a programmer in Prague. Her husband Jacek was also a programmer. They
had one child, Stefan, who was three years old.

The pieces of the puzzle were starting to come together, Peter reflected. Tonight he hoped to add several more.

The surveillance cams at La Dordogne had been set up to monitor the guests from different angles. Peter would watch it in the studio alone with just one technician present. He felt an increasing uneasiness as the hour approached. He told himself, it was just because he hadn't seen Neal in two days and wanted to verify he was doing okay. But his gut was telling him it was more than that.

At 6:30 p.m. Peter moved into the monitoring room and prepared himself for a long evening.

At 7:15 p.m. four people entered the wine cellar: Mansfeld, Neal, Marta, and Jacek. With their arrival came the first roadblock. They were all speaking German so Peter would have to wait for the captioned version of the feed before he could understand what they were saying.

Nevertheless Peter kept his eyes glued to the monitor. Their speaking a foreign language allowed him to concentrate on body language. Marta and Jacek frequently nudged each other, apparently sharing private jokes and comments. Neal and Mansfeld treated each other as old friends. Peter could tell Neal was chattering away in German just as he would have in English, at times being every bit as sarcastic and flippant. Mansfeld appeared to enjoy ribbing him. They all used their hands so much a person could get dizzy from watching them.

He didn't know if it was partly because they were speaking German, but they all even looked European. Must be the clothes. Marta was wearing a bohemian embroidered short dress and boots. Those jackets the men wore—the lapels were barely wide enough to qualify as such. It was a new look for Neal. Was that the reason for the clothes delivery?

At one point Mansfeld seemed to be ribbing Neal about something with the others apparently joining in. What was that all about? Late in the evening, the mood changed. Mansfeld appeared emotional. He spoke for a long time with Marta and Jacek paying close attention. Neal often looked away and appeared somewhat embarrassed. Mansfeld then reached over and gave Neal a one-arm hug. Afterwards, Neal laid a hand on his shoulder while he spoke very earnestly about something. Whatever he said was gratifying for Mansfeld to hear as he gave him another hug. How much of that was a con? How much of it was the wine speaking?

Speaking of which, just how much wine had they drunk? Peter had lost track of how many bottles had been served. As soon as a bottle was empty, it was whisked away and replaced with another.

And the food . . . El would love to watch the feed simply to see the dishes. They looked more like works of art than something meant to be eaten. Maybe he was getting grumpy from watching others eat, but those plates did seem inordinately large to hold such small bites of food, even if they were artistically arranged. That was probably the point. Force the patrons to order more dishes to get a reasonable amount to eat. How large a bill did Mansfeld rack up?

After three hours, the group left the restaurant, and Peter headed home, feeling hungry, thirsty, and uneasy over much of what he'd seen. The setting, the language, the clothes, his mannerisms—the Neal he knew had been transformed into a stranger. He'd like to think that was simply Neal demonstrating his expert con artist ability. Specialists would work overnight to prepare a captioned version of the feed. Until it was ready Peter would have to wait for the answers.
Notes: I posted this chapter on the day the final episode of White Collar was due to be broadcast in the United States, a very sad moment for all of us who love White Collar. I'd like to express my gratitude to all those associated with the series for creating such a captivating world. I'm certainly not ready to close the book on the fascinating characters of White Collar.

When I first read Caffrey Conversation, what appealed to me the most, apart from Penna Nomen's elegant prose, was the optimistic vision she presented for a younger version of Neal Caffrey who didn't have to go to prison. Her AU has so much storytelling potential, that we're continuing at full tilt to spin out ideas for future stories. We hope you'll join us!

Penna will begin posting her new story by the end of December. In the meantime, if you'd like to read a Christmas tale, we suggest you read Choirboy Caffrey, which is the second story in the series. She's posted a Choirboy Caffrey board on our Caffrey Conversation Pinterest site, and the illustrations she's chosen add a new dimension to the story with fresh insights. Think of it as a Christmas card from Penna to you.

Blog: Penna Nomen & Silbrith Conversation: www.pennasilbrithconversation.blogspot.com
Chapter Visuals: The Woman in Blue board at the Caffrey Conversation Pinterest website: www.pinterest.com/caffreycon
Peter eyed the padded envelope waiting for him on the desk with unexpected reluctance. He had arrived early at work that morning, anxious to review the captioned feed of the dinner at La Dordogne from the previous evening. He should be excited about the possibility of finding out new intel on the upcoming heist, and he was. But coupled to that was a mounting concern that Neal was in over his head.

Ripping open the package, he half expected to see smoke come out. Well, at least the DVD hadn't burst into flames, he consoled himself. How bad could it be?

Peter closed his office door, inserted the DVD into his computer, and began reviewing the feed. For the first hour, much of the conversation was on art—various schools, new techniques, new leaders, the East European art climate. There were some heated discussions over different artists, but the elephant in the room that everyone avoided was the heist. To anyone listening in, they were a group of art connoisseurs. Neal asked Marta and Jacek about video gaming. Apparently they were experts in game programming and entered into a highly technical discussion of gaming graphics that Peter would have to ask Jones about. He doubted there was anything in it relevant to the heist.

More interesting was the teasing that had occurred about Neal's classes. Mansfeld, Marta, and Jacek all piled on the jabs. Bunch of intellectual snobs—Neal wasn't kidding when he said that Mansfeld had given him grief over his lack of a degree. No wonder it was a sore subject.

The exchange at the end of the evening though was what was most troubling. It was obvious from the body language that Mansfeld and to a lesser extent Neal had gotten emotional, but the translation was even more alarming. What Mansfeld called Neal, the references to their past history, all that would have to be addressed. Up to this point what Peter had been given were just a few bones, but now the entire skeleton had been exhumed. The question was what to do about it?

Fortunately, Neal had a class that evening. More than ever Peter needed to talk with him. But it was late in the game to have the conversation that should have occurred before Neal went undercover. Damn it, Neal, why didn't you tell me?

Rousing him from his thoughts was the buzz of his cell phone—an unknown number. Neal?

"Peter Burke."

"What have you done, Suit? Where's Neal?"

Groaning to himself, Peter attempted to calm Mozzie down. "Relax, Haversham. Neal's fine."

"How do you know that? June said she hasn't seen him for days!" he retorted, obviously agitated. "Is he being held a prisoner? He has rights, you know!"

Tempting as it was to feed Mozzie's paranoia, Peter didn't have time for this, and remembering Neal's warning, the last thing he wanted was for Mozzie to start searching for him. "Neal's in the midst of an undercover op, and I repeat, he's fine. He mentioned you were out of the country and might call. He told me to tell you brioche."

"Yeah, well, I'm not in the mood for breakfast. What's really going on? As his lawyer I demand to
speak with him and confirm he hasn't been brainwashed."

Rolling his eyes, Peter counted to ten. "That's not going to happen, and the only brainwashing that's going on will be on you if you don't calm down."

He huffed loudly. "Just tell him to be careful, okay? He has a tendency to forget that."

"On that we're in agreement. I'll tell him, I promise."

**Columbia University. September 23, 2004. Thursday evening.**

At 6 p.m. Peter met Neal's advisor, Ivan Sherkov, at his office.

Sherkov greeted him warmly. "So, Peter or should I say 'Dr. Burkowski', I hope you enjoyed my class on Monday?"

"It was very . . . illuminating," Peter replied, feeling like a schoolboy and hoping against hope he wouldn't be grilled on the subject.

"Yes, I'm sure." Sherkov's eyes twinkled as if he could read Peter's mind, but mercifully he didn't ask him any other questions about it. "Neal's seminar this evening is on Egyptian art in the eighteenth dynasty. I talked with the professor, Martine Giron. And we thought you would perhaps find it more comfortable to wait in another room?"

"That's an excellent idea," Peter replied, trying not to make his relief too obvious.

"You can wait in a conference room down the hall. It even has a coffee maker. Martine will have Neal join you around eight o'clock."

Better and better. "Very thoughtful of you, Ivan. I can work while waiting for Neal."

"Yes, and there's a well-stocked bookcase of art books, should you become bored. I could also lend you some of mine on Caravaggism."

"Oh, I wouldn't want to trouble you," Peter said hastily.

"No? If you're sure. And, Peter, if you should find it necessary to extend the op into next week, I'm at your disposal."

*That better not be necessary,* Peter thought to himself.

**WCWCWCWCWCWCWC**

Neal showed up for his seminar on Egyptian art a few minutes early. Looking around, he was disappointed to not find Peter. What was going on? Peter had said he'd be here. If his plans had changed, wouldn't he have sent someone else? Neal only now realized how badly he wanted to talk to him.

*Calm down,* he lectured himself. *He's just delayed. He'll be here.* Picking a seat close to the door and as far away from where his professor sat as possible, Neal got out his notes. Eighteenth dynastic Egyptian art was the last thing on his mind right now, but somehow he needed to haul himself out of the rut he'd fallen into.

Correction, not a rut, a volcano, and all day he could feel the eruption building up inside him. As long as he'd been focused on painting the forgery, he was able to ignore, at least most of the time,
the more troubling aspects of this job. But now that the painting was done and being aged, everything else was bubbling to the surface. It was like he was clinging precariously to the top of the crater of Mt. Vesuvius and molten lava was already beginning to spew out. Neal began doodling volcanos on a sheet of paper as he waited for class to start.

The dinner at La Dordogne had started the rumblings in earnest. That was the problem of having too much wine. Tongues were loosened. Subjects were broached that should have been left unsaid. That's why he made it a point not to drink to excess, particularly not during a job.

And he hadn't. But Klaus? Why had he gone there? Neal was trying to bury those feelings, and Klaus certainly hadn't done him any favors. It was becoming increasingly difficult to think of him as just another stormtrooper. But that's what he had to do.

Maybe he could smother those thoughts underneath the lava. That is, if he didn't get asphyxiated from the poisonous fumes. Neal doodled a charred skeleton covered in volcanic ash, one arm upraised in a futile attempt to ward off the river of lava. That was a comforting thought—now he felt so much better. Sighing, Neal started reading his notes from the previous session.

Michael sat down next to him. "Those are some scary images you've got going," he said, glancing down at Neal's doodles. "You reliving the last moments of Pompeii?"

Neal gave him a rueful smile. "They seemed to match my mood. Don't mind me—crazy night last night."

Michael looked at him appraisingly. "You do seem a little green around the gills. Too much partying?"

"I guess. Any tips on shaking off foul humors?"

"Rowing—you can't beat it," Michael said promptly. "Take a single scull out on the Harlem River, just you and the water. Early morning's the best. You should try it sometime. I could help you get started."

He should have known that's what Michael would say. Michael was a fanatic on rowing. Unlikely combination for someone in art history, but he'd picked it up in Seattle.

Professor Giron walked in and started the seminar. Neal tried to concentrate on what she was saying, but quickly realized it was a lost cause. It was fortunate she began with a lecture. She must have taken pity on him. How did she know about the crater he was clinging to?

He wouldn't be feeling so lousy if he'd been able to sleep last night, but the nightmare made a shambles out of that. He couldn't get the image out of his head: Klaus in an orange jumpsuit, screaming at him as he was led out of court. "Traitor, traitor!" It was still reverberating in the back corners of his mind . . . .

A nudge from Michael jolted Neal back to reality. He looked up to see Giron had placed several small statues on the table. Giron was dividing the students into groups of two as she instructed them to work up a detailed description of a statue in thirty minutes.

Turning to Neal, she said, "You'll be working by yourself, Neal. Your statue was too large to bring in here. You'll find it in Room 411. Bring back your report to me in a half-hour."

Neal tossed his notebook into his backpack and headed down the hall to the conference room. This was one statue he couldn't wait to see.
Peter had finished his paperwork and was starting to get restless. He shouldn't have drunk so much coffee. That was probably adding to his edginess. He needed to be calm when he talked with Neal. If he started venting, Neal might—

The door opened, and Neal walked in. Looking at Peter with obvious relief he broke into a smile. "Yes, I agree. You wouldn't have fit that well on the conference table."

"Did I miss something?" asked Peter.

"Professor Giron said that I should write a report on the Egyptian statue in this room. Mind striking a pose?"

"Sherkov and Giron jointly decided to spare your class my profound insights into ancient Egypt, a wise decision on their part." Motioning Neal to sit down, he slid over a mug of coffee. "Figured you could use some."

"Thanks, Professor Giron is a harsh taskmistress. No coffee allowed during her class. A few sips and I'll be human again." Neal held the mug breathing in the aroma. As he drank, his mask slipped, revealing the lines of exhaustion on his face.

"You holding up okay?" Peter asked, hoping his concern wasn't too annoying.


"That's great. Does that mean your part's done and you can leave?"

"No, not quite." Neal sat up and started rolling a pen in his fingers. "I need to stay around through Saturday afternoon to help with the setup, then I'll be done. I'm to carry the painting into the Met by hiding it in my sketch pad."

"Will it fit?" Peter asked, surprised.

"Easily. After all, the painting is only 18 by 15 inches. Klaus is taking advantage of my Columbia ID. Since I've got clearance to carry a sketch pad around at the Met, it's the perfect solution."

"Mansfeld must have been overjoyed at that."

"Oh, yeah. He can't wait to exploit my Columbia connections even more." Leaning forward, Neal added, "Marta and Jacek have programmed devices that override the security sensors, putting them into unreported test loops. I can use one to open a storeroom near the exhibit and hide the painting. Peter, the devices they're using are the most sophisticated I've ever seen. I managed to talk with Marta a little about them. They didn't develop the decryption software. Someone else did and sold it to Klaus. I'm trying to learn more about it."

The discovery that there was someone providing decryption software to override museum security systems could be almost as big a takeaway from the op as capturing Mansfeld. Peter was torn between wanting to encourage Neal to learn more about it and telling him to hold back because it was too high a risk. In the end he copped out, "Find out what you can, but not at the risk of blowing your cover."

Neal nodded. "Don't worry. My part in the heist ends with placing the painting in the storeroom. After that I'm free to leave. So far they haven't shared any of the details of what happens afterward." Stretching his back, he stood up and walked over to the bookcase. "Need to know."
"Well, I for one am glad you're not going to be there during the robbery." No point in delaying this any longer. Checking his watch, Peter knew he needed to get this conversation started before they ran out of time. "Couple of other things on my list. First of all, you're to be commended for training the team so well."

"My pleasure." A trace of Neal the smartass resurfaced as Peter had hoped. "Was there anything you found particularly impressive?"

"Tuesday Tails have been a big success. Jones, Tricia, Diana, they all thank you for upping their game."

With an expansive wave of his hand, Neal flashed a smile. "Glad to be of service."

"They tailed Marta at the Met Wednesday. The biggest fish was Mansfeld. On Tuesday they tracked him to a restaurant—La Dordogne. Later Tricia and Diana ran a Wally Burns to find out about the reservation he made." Peter watched Neal carefully for his reaction to the news. "Guess I missed that lesson."

Neal nodded, refilling his mug even though there was still plenty of coffee in it.

Time to rip off the bandage. "Neal, we set up surveillance cameras in the wine cellar at La Dordogne. I watched the video feed and have the translation. Sit down. We need to discuss what went on."

With that Neal's tension became palpable. "I don't think we talked about the heist."

"No you didn't. It was what the conversation revealed about you and Mansfeld that concerns me. Why didn't you tell me you were such close friends? More than friends, you were a member of his family. He speaks of you as being the brother he'd never had. Hell, he sounded at times exactly like your cousin Henry. And afterwards, that tribute you gave about what he'd done for you . . . What's going on?"

"I told you we'd worked together for a couple of years."

"Yeah, but the way Mansfeld talked about you made it sound like a lot more than a casual working relationship."

Gazing off at the bookcase, Neal was silent for a minute. "When I left for Europe in 2001, I was . . . well, messed up, to put it bluntly. Henry was angry at me for running off. I hadn't told him about how his father was blackmailing me to force me to cut off all ties with him, and Henry really laid into me. I was mad at Henry, mad at his father, mad at the world. When Robert said that a criminal was all I ever was going to be, something snapped. I was out to prove I wasn't just any criminal but a supersized version."

"That's understandable. After Robert blackmailed you, it's no wonder you felt the way you did. When your cousin took you under his wing, he provided stability and gave you a sense of belonging. Robert ripped that apart."

Neal nodded in agreement. "Not long afterwards, I met Klaus and Chantal. I suppose the timing was right. His relations with his own younger brother were nonexistent, and he I filled the void." Neal paused and winced. "Someone to boss around. People seem to like bossing me around—it's a curse. Anyway, Chantal was great—she became the big sister I never had. The two of them became my family. And, for a while, that worked well for us. He grounded me. I learned a lot. Even some things you'd approve of." He glanced up at Peter with an oddly wistful expression.
Peter got up and sat next to Neal. "You should have told me. There are many valid reasons why we don't allow agents who have close personal ties to be involved in ops. That's one lesson you must have missed."

Neal looked at him in frustration. "I didn't think it had a bearing on the case. Besides, you need to know all of it. You heard the good part, but you haven't heard the rest. I've been wanting to tell you, but the timing never seemed right."

"You mean about Berlin? Marta asked why you'd left, and you said you'd decided to go out on your own. Klaus added that Berlin had been a mistake, but he wouldn't let that happen again."

"Klaus had organized the theft of a painting in the Nationalgalerie in Berlin. I'll spare you the details, but the job went south, the painting wasn't stolen, and a guard was killed during the chaos at the end. I didn't do it, but it was a wake-up call. I left Klaus's organization the next day. Up to then, firearms hadn't been used. No one to my knowledge had ever been injured or killed. After Berlin, I didn't look at Klaus the same way. I began to doubt he was who I thought he was. Klaus swore he hadn't been the one, but . . . ."

"You didn't believe him," Peter finished for him.

Neal nodded. "I had my suspicions. The problem was I still liked him, and Chantal was so special"—Neal stopped and brushing back his hair, tried again—"I didn't know what else to do, so I ran. I never intended to go back, but now here I am. I've got the same doubts and concerns, and yet, the friendship's still there too. I remember all he did for me back then. He's not making it easy. I . . . ."

Neal's voice trailed off and he rubbed the side of his face with his hand.

"At the restaurant after Klaus hugged you, when you thanked him for all he'd done for you, was that real or a con? Tell me the truth."

"Some of each I guess," said Neal reluctantly. "I'd like to say it was pure con, but I can't help being grateful for what he did."

"Look at me, Neal. Have you considered Klaus is conning you now?" Neal stared at Peter in disbelief as Peter continued relentlessly. "He's messing with your head. Making you feel guilty because you left. Klaus wants you back, and he knows how to play the exact right cards to make you want to. You need to face up to that. While you're conning him, he's doing a helluva number on you." Peter pressed on without stopping. "Klaus is dangerous, he's ruthless. He'll do whatever it takes to achieve his objective. Tell me he's not working his damnedest to get you to join him again?"

"No, he's mounting quite the sales job. He said we're alike, we're brothers. It's in our DNA."

"He's wrong, and you know that. Don't let him get to you."

"I haven't, Peter. You can't believe I'd betray you," Neal looked wide-eyed at him in dismay. "There's no way I'd go back."

"No, I don't." said Peter, lowering his voice. "What worries me is that by instilling doubts, he'll get you to slip up, and what he'll do to you if he finds out you're working for us. He's playing you as hard as he can. You told me he doesn't take chances. This is just one more instance. He doesn't trust anyone, Neal, and that includes you. That's who he is."

Neal gave him the ghost of a smile. "The old Jedi mind-tricks game. It's time for me to up my own game. Thanks for the reminder. Living on the Death Star can be intense."
Peter laid a hand on his shoulder. "I know. I wish you didn't have to go back. But we've got to finish this. I need to know, will you be able to?"

"I'll make it work," Neal promised. "You don't have to worry about that. Look, it's time—I need to get back to class."

Peter handed him a page of notes. "Here's something you can use for the report. Giron supplied them. She also said she feared she'd run out of time before you could make your presentation. I have to say your professors have been amazingly cooperative."

"I expect they're having a great time being part of an FBI op."

"You planning to go to your lecture Saturday morning?"

He nodded. "Shouldn't be a problem."

"Try to get there a little early. Save me a seat."

"You're coming to that, too?"

"Hell, yeah, I may just sign up for classes myself. 'Professor Burkowski' could use a few refresher courses."

At the conclusion of his Thursday evening class Neal walked to the subway stop, not bothering to tease the guy following him. His conversation with Peter forced him to focus on some harsh truths. Klaus was playing him—why hadn't he considered that? Looking back on how the past five days had gone, he had to admit Klaus was pushing all his buttons.

That was the trouble with Klaus. He knew exactly what worked best. Trust Peter to sift through all the smoke and get to the heart of the matter. The guy was a bloodhound. Or maybe a St. Bernard? That coffee he provided might not have been June's gourmet blend but at that moment it was nectar from the gods. Time to focus, stay sharp. Less than two days and Neal's part would be over. He could return to his new life and leave the old ways behind.

Neal entered the townhouse, expecting to hear Klaus playing the piano, his usual evening pastime. But instead of the lyrical strains of a Beethoven or Schubert sonata wafting through the house, the sounds of sobbing were emanating from the living room. Puzzled, Neal walked inside where he found Jacek trying to console Marta. Klaus was on the phone in the far corner.

"Jacek, what happened?"

"We heard our son was in a car accident. In Prague. He's in intensive care."

"Oh, man I'm so sorry." He didn't know they had a child. They seemed too young.

Klaus walked over to join them. "It's all arranged. You're on a flight leaving at seven o'clock tomorrow morning. You'll be with your son before you know it." Hugging Marta, he said, "It's an excellent hospital he's at and he's getting the best care."

"Thank you, Klaus," Jacek said, gripping Klaus's hand. "We'll make it up to you."

"Don't worry about that. Just take care of your boy. Why don't you two go upstairs and start packing? Neal and I have some items to discuss."

Neal helped himself to a cognac after they left and sat down with Klaus. "How serious is it?"

"It doesn't look good," Klaus said in a low voice. "He wasn't in a car seat. His aunt was driving the car. She's dead and he's in intensive care with only a slim chance of surviving."

Neal rubbed the back of his head. "Something like that happens, it changes everything."

"Yes, and not only with them. Now it's just you and me for the job."

"You want to go ahead?"

"Of course. Their devices are already programmed. There's a little fine-tuning still to perform, but nothing we can't handle. Later on tonight we'll go through everything with Jacek. Still plenty of time to finalize our plans. I'd rather have you than them with me anyway. Old times, bro."

Neal flashed him a smile. "Good. I was starting to worry I'd miss out on all the action."

Bolstered by countless cups of coffee, Klaus and Neal worked with Jacek late into the night on
finishing the sensor devices while Marta prepared for the flight. The devices had to be precisely calibrated and although the bulk of the programming had been done earlier that week, Neal and Klaus needed to understand how to reprogram them in case the museum changed its codes. It was painstaking, precise work. Marta and Jacek left at 4 a.m. for the airport, and after seeing them off, Neal and Klaus collapsed on the sofa.

"My brain's going to explode," Neal said with a groan. The night had reminded him of his cramming for the Columbia entrance exams, not an experience he had hoped to relive so soon. "My neurons are not hooked up for me to be a programmer."

"You and me too." Klaus looked as drained as Neal felt.

"Do you ever think maybe we should find a simpler life?"

Klaus shook his head wearily and laughed. "What would be the fun in that? I'd have to shoot myself out of boredom, and I bet you'd feel the same."

"Yeah, I guess. Sleep is overrated." Putting his feet up, Neal gazed up the ceiling. How would he be able to warn Peter? What would his reaction be?

Looking over at him, Klaus asked, "What scheme are you concocting?"

"You'll laugh, but my forgery's so good, I bet we could convince the buyer it was the genuine painting and just sleep in on Saturday."

"You are tired. I should have enforced a stricter curfew. You know what your problem is? You haven't pulled a job like this in so long, you've forgotten what it's like. You'll be fine once you get back into it and experience that unbelievable rush from knowing you're pulling something illegal and no one can stop you. You'll feel invincible and could care less about sleeping."

"Maybe."

"Don't like my answer? All right, you tell me. What motivates Neal Caffrey?" Neal could feel Klaus's eyes boring into him.

He was silent for a minute as he rested his head on the back of the sofa. "It's not the stuff, I know that. You'd think I'd care more about money, but I really don't. Excitement, that rush you're talking about, that's a factor. The challenge, that's a big part of it. The people—"

"You gotta be careful about that, bro," Klaus cautioned. "Attachments in our line of work are dangerous. They make you weak, they make you doubt, they make you hesitate. And that can prove deadly. You're too much a romantic for your own good."

"You're right. Must be the exhaustion talking. Forget it."

"Relax, for the rest of the day, there's nothing you need do but sleep. You don't have any classes, do you?"

"Actually I was thinking of going to my studio at Columbia in the afternoon. I haven't a chance to work on my own art, and next week I'm supposed to give a presentation to the faculty on my ideas for the end-of-year exhibition. Painting should help clear my head too."

"Mind if I tag along?"

"You won't be bored?"
"Not at all. I'm curious about what your plans are. You can give me a tour of the campus. We'll catch a bite at the student center or whatever hangout you use. It'll give me a chance to compare Columbia with my university. Who knows, I may decide to go for some Postdoc training at Columbia. Besides, I could use a change of scene too. I've been cooped up here too long."

"Sounds perfect. Let's do it." Perfect, right. Another plan vaporizing in front of him as he smiled cheerfully back at Klaus. His chances of slipping away to contact Peter just became exponentially trickier. It was like Klaus could read his mind.

Burke residence. September 24, 2004. Friday morning, 7 a.m.

"El, have you seen my car keys?" Peter rummaged through the drawer one more time. She called up from the foot of the stairs. "They're on the kitchen counter where you left them last night."

Peter went downstairs, suit jacket in hand. "Thanks, hon. Hope I'm not turning into an absent-minded husband."

"I'm giving you a pass this time. You have an excellent excuse this week to be distracted. Do you have time for a cup of coffee?"

"For you, always," Peter said gallantly while resisting the urge to look at his watch. "How'd your rehearsal go yesterday?" Hanging his jacket on a chair, he sat at the table.

"It was fantastic," El said as she brought two cups over. "This is the first time I've ever acted in an Agatha Christie play, and The Hollow has a super part for me. I'm to play Veronica Craye, a film star whom men swoon for. I get to overact as part of the character—how great is that—and even storm off stage after proclaiming, 'If I can't have you, no one shall.' I'll be suspected of murder but of course will be found innocent. Janet is providing costumes for the production and has picked some wonderful over-the-top outfits for me."

"Sounds like the perfect role for you. When did you say opening night is? I need to write it down on my work calendar."

The buzz of Peter's cell phone interrupted them. It was Tricia, calling him about the Kolars' departure. "Marta and Jacek were picked up by a limo service and driven to JFK airport early this morning. They were flying under fake identities but we were able to match their photos and obtain their flight information. They're already on a flight to Prague."

Peter frowned at the news. "Any ideas on why they left?"

"So far nothing. Do you want us to contact Interpol about them?"

"Not yet. I don't want to raise any flags. The timing's too sensitive at this point." Peter turned off his phone as he chewed over what the Kolars' departure would mean to the heist. It was highly improbable they'd be back in time for Saturday evening. Had the job been called off? Had Mansfeld discovered the truth about Neal? Or was it rather that he wanted Neal to participate in the heist rather than the Kolars? Was this all part of his effort to recruit Neal?

"What's happened?" El asked, concern showing in her face.

"Change in plans, hon. The Leopard's up to something and I don't like the sound of it. I better head on in."
Peter went over his options on the drive to work. Until he heard something from Neal, they'd have to continue as planned. No question but Neal would try to contact him about the Kolars. What excuse could he use? His only chance to leave would be to go to Columbia, but he didn't have any classes on Friday. There was his studio … that had to be it. Calling the surveillance team from his car, Peter ordered them to let him know immediately if anyone left the townhouse.

Once at the office, Peter discussed the latest developments with Tricia. Most of the other team members were working surveillance. Hughes joined them later for a briefing in the conference room. The museum stayed open till 9 p.m. on Saturday. They presumed the heist wouldn't take place till sometime after then, but Peter wanted everyone to be in position before Neal arrived to drop off the painting. That meant long shifts for everyone. Hughes was coordinating the op with NYPD. They would be covering the outside perimeter of the museum once Mansfeld was inside the museum.

"NYPD needs to be alerted not to move into position until our signal," Peter warned.

"I'll make sure NYPD is aware of it," assured Hughes.

"Once Mansfeld is inside, we'll move the surveillance van and auxiliary support along the north side of the museum, on 85th Street," Tricia added. "Travis will be in charge of communications and liaison with the command center inside the museum."

"Any word from Caffrey? I don't like not knowing what the Czechs' departure means." said Hughes.

"Nothing yet. My hope is he'll be able to contact us from Columbia today. We had originally planned to meet on Saturday morning."

"That's cutting it very close," Hughes warned. "Work on a backup plan in case you don't hear anything. Could anyone get into the townhouse to check on Caffrey's status?"

"Without raising the Leopard's suspicion?" Peter shook his head doubtfully. After Hughes left, he and Tricia went over various scenarios to try to contact Neal, but the risk of blowing Neal's cover was uncomfortably high for all of them.

At 2 p.m. Peter's phone buzzed. It was surveillance. Finally there was activity at the townhouse. Neal had been observed leaving it, but he wasn't alone. Mansfeld was with him. The same Mercedes SUV had pulled up for them and was now being followed.

Not good, Peter thought as he rubbed his forehead. Neal's chances of contacting him were dropping steadily. Fifteen minutes later he was alerted that the Mercedes had let them off at Columbia. At this point Peter could only wait and hope Neal could find a chance to reach him.


"Not as palatial as what you fixed me up with in the townhouse, but it's comfortable," Neal said as he showed Klaus his studio.

"On the contrary, this is impressive." Klaus examined the cabinets of supplies then walked over to the worktable to study Neal's sketches. "Talk to me about what you're working on," he commanded.

"I've barely started. I was assigned my studio only a few weeks ago and since then have been sketching out various ideas." As Neal discussed his art, he pulled out more of his drawings. His former mentor was a good listener and even better at asking the right questions. Perched on a stool,
Klaus probed him for what he wanted to accomplish. Klaus wasn't an artist himself, but he had an amazing grasp of the artistic process. Talking through his ideas, Neal realized, was giving him a much better vision of where he should take his work.

They were interrupted by a light knock. Opening the door, Neal found a fellow student, Keiko Nakahara, standing in the doorway.

Keiko was flustered when she saw Klaus and stammered an apology. She quickly attempted to back out of the doorway, but Klaus welcomed her in. Would Keiko's arrival provide the opportunity Neal was looking for?

"You came at a good time," Neal said. "We needed a break. Klaus, this is Keiko. She started this year too. Both of us are still finding our way around."

Klaus was at his gallant best. "Compared to me, you're experts. This is my first visit to Columbia, and Neal was gracious enough to be my tour guide. It's a magnificent facility."

"Did you need my help with something?" Neal asked.

"I was going to ask your advice on a sculpture I'm starting, but it can easily wait."

"I was about to suggest heading out to fetch us some coffee," Klaus said. "We passed a coffee shack just outside that looks promising. You two go ahead and start your discussion." As the three of them walked down the hall to her studio he added, "Keiko, could I bring you back anything?"

"Oh no, I wouldn't impose," Keiko protested.

"I insist," said Klaus.

Neal added, "He really is quite relentless, Keiko. You might as well make him happy and let him bring you something back."

"In that case, their espresso macchiato is sinful. A visit to Columbia wouldn't be considered complete without one."

"Three macchiatos coming up!" Klaus bowed with a flourish as they arrived at her studio.

Closing the studio door behind them, Neal gave a sigh of relief—finally a break in his direction. He quickly asked, "Keiko, could I borrow your phone? There's an important call I need to make, and I forgot to bring mine. It's about a surprise birthday party for Klaus, so please, not a word about this to him."

"What fun—I can be part of the conspiracy!" Keiko's eyes lit up as she readily handed over her phone.

**White Collar Division. September 24, 2004. Friday afternoon.**

Peter was working in his office when his cell phone buzzed. He looked at the display—unknown caller. Please, God, this time let it be Neal and not Mozzie.

"Peter Burke."

"Hey, Peter! This is Neal." Neal's voice was bubbling over with enthusiasm. Something must be going on. All right, two could play this game.

"Hey, buddy, good to hear from you! How ya doing?"
"Keiko let me borrow her phone. I gotta talk fast—the birthday boy will be back any minute. We had to change the time for the party tomorrow. It will start at 7 o'clock in the evening. Can you make it?"

"Wouldn't miss it. Will you be there?"

"Of course. It couldn't start without me! Too bad about Marta and Jacek though. They're going to be no shows."

"Yeah, I heard."

"We can discuss the party plans tomorrow morning around 9:30. The student lounge at Schermerhorn Hall. Are you free then?"

"Count on it."

"Good—I need your help. The video cam we were planning to use won't work. Turns out the room isn't suitable. Bad lighting. We'll have to think up something else. Something much simpler. Gotta run—see ya tomorrow."

And Neal hung up.

That answered one question—the heist was still on. Peter reached for the phone to call the lab. It would be a busy afternoon devising a different strategy. He better call in their tech expert, Travis Miller. He was a genius when it came to obscure electronics, and that was exactly what they would need.

**Burke home, Brooklyn. September 24, 2004. Friday evening.**

After dinner, Peter sat at the dining room table going over the revised plan while El finished washing dishes in the kitchen. He wasn't going to win any best husband awards after the way he'd been neglecting her this week. He'd have to make it up to her when this op was over. But right now he was too concerned about what was going down the next day. They were as prepared as they could be, but this latest development had thrown them a curve ball.

"Peter, what's wrong?"

Peter looked up at El and had the feeling she had been talking to him for a while. "Sorry, what'd you say?"

"It's this case. Are you afraid Neal won't be able to go through with it?" El sat down next to him at the table.

"The saving grace in all this was that Neal would not participate in the robbery itself, but that's been tossed out now. A thousand things could go wrong. El, you haven't seen his transformation. He started off the week his usual cocky, flippant self, and now—he's a bundle of nerves from being pulled in opposite directions. I keep pulling him to our side whenever I'm with him, but I know Mansfeld's not letting up. You didn't see the feed—Mansfeld talking about Neal being the kid brother he never had, how much he means to him. He was laying it on with a snow shovel."

"Do you think Neal believes him?"

"Hard to tell. He was either giving the con performance of his life or was falling for it. In any case, it was undoubtedly messing with his emotions."
"Those meetings with you have been his escape valve. You're seeing him tomorrow, right? You need to come up with something to take more of the pressure off. Let him breathe."

"Any ideas on how I could manage that?"

El considered a few moments and then eyed Peter calculatingly.

"El, what are you thinking?" Peter asked suspiciously

"You remember my friend Janet, the wardrobe supervisor? She may be able to help with an idea I have. This could be just what you're looking for. It's a little late but let me give her a call."

**Schmerhorn Hall, Columbia University. September 25, 2004. Saturday morning.**

Why had he let El talk him into this? Okay, the jeans and sweatshirt were fine. Not his style, but not too bad. The mustache, that was a stretch, but he could go along with it. But the hair. Really?

Just walking through campus, he had already gotten more than enough curious stares to last him a lifetime, thank you very much. Still if it worked . . . .

Peter strolled into the lounge on the ground floor of Schmerhorn Hall. Carved out of a former classroom, it had been outfitted with modular furniture to form small L-shaped niches for conversation and study. Neal was sprawled in one of the niches, reading a book, backpack on the floor beside him.

Peter walked up from behind. "Hey, man, mind if I join you?"

Neal looked up at Peter and lost it. Trying to stifle his laughter, his faced turned beet red. Giving up, he put his hand over his mouth and faked a huge coughing fit to conceal it. He motioned Peter to sit down and finally pulled himself together after what really did seem to be an excessively long time.

Clearing his throat as he wiped his eyes, he said, "Why, Han, I hardly recognized you. Thought you'd sent Chewbacca instead."

"Simmer down, Skywalker. You can blame El for this. Her devious mind realized that it wouldn't do for me to reuse Dr. Burkowski. Could raise suspicions."

"Your wife is remarkably astute. In your present disguise, no one would ever suspect you of anything that requires a brain."

Looking at Neal's relaxed, happy grin, Peter sighed with relief. Chalk one up for El, miracle worker. "I want you to know I got the eye from several attractive coeds as I walked over."

"Yeah, but did you notice them pulling out their phones to call the campus police?"

"We probably should start before your lecture begins, wise guy."

"Right," Neal flipped a switch and turned all business. "About the Kolars . . . ."

"Yeah, what happened?"

"They flew back to be with their 3-year old son who was in a car accident. He was in intensive care, not expected to live."

"Are you sure this wasn't a ruse to get them out of the picture so you'd be the one doing the job?"
Shaking his head slowly, Neal said, "Not possible. They were far too distraught for it to be an act."

Peter wished he were as certain. "Do you have any reason to believe Mansfeld suspects you?"

"No," Neal said shortly. "If he did, he wouldn't want me there during the heist."

"What about if he intended you to be the fall guy?"

"Fair question, but it's not his style. The heist is designed so that no one will suspect the switch has occurred. There's no reason to need a fall guy, unless, that is, it goes south. But that's understood." Neal shrugged and didn't appear to be upset by the possibility.

Not particularly reassuring but there was still too much to be discussed. Peter asked, "Mansfeld must have had to fill you in on the heist details by now. How's it going down?"

Neal rattled off the outline of the job as he continued to sprawl nonchalantly on the sectional. "Klaus and I will arrive separately. I'll get to the museum at 7 p.m. He will show up shortly afterwards. I'll take along my sketch pad with the Vermeer concealed inside. The plan is for me to do some sketching in the French Impressionists Gallery before leaving for the storage room. By closing time at 9 p.m. we will both be hiding in the storage room next to the Dutch Masters exhibit, the one labeled C-346. At 11 p.m. we'll leave and enter the exhibit. I'll remove the painting from its frame and replace it. Klaus will assist and also watch for guards. The whole operation should take 20-25 minutes, then we'll exit via emergency stairs to the roof and climb down from there. There's a guard who patrols the galleries every thirty minutes, so it will be close."

Peter was writing down notes as he spoke. "Got it. What did you learn about the electronics you'll be using?"

"We already knew that their devices would freeze the video feed of the museum cameras, but it turns out Klaus is also bringing his wireless detection finder. I can't use any sort of transmitter to alert you. The art works themselves are connected to security via sensors built into the walls, but our devices will disrupt any signal. He also has a jamming device which blocks detection of his equipment when he goes through security."

"I figured it was something like that. I went to work with Travis after your call. He resurrected some old equipment out of mothballs, and I present you with this." Peter handed Neal a ballpoint pen.

Neal twirled the pen in his fingers, looking quizzically at Peter.

"It's basically a dog whistle."

Neal grinned. "Does it also call up Wookiees?"

"It just might. It's set to emit a signal in the ultrasonic range and is inaudible to human ears. Twirling the tube counterclockwise unlocks it. Push the button to emit the whistle. One whistle when you leave the storeroom—that will alert us you've started. Two whistles for us to enter the gallery and make the arrest. Three whistles is the panic signal to send in the cavalry. Our monitoring equipment will have no problem picking up your signal."

"Very ingenious—this could work. Klaus certainly won't be expecting a dog whistle."

"It better." Peter said firmly. "I grilled Travis about it and he assures me the monitoring equipment will be adequate. When we make the arrests, you'll also be cuffed. Don't try to resist or Diana might forget you're one of the good guys."
"Don't worry, I shall capitulate without a struggle. But when it comes to Klaus . . . Peter, I don't know what he'll do when he's cornered. When I was with him, the only time a job went bad, a guard was killed."

"I'll make sure everyone is prepared. You keep that in mind too. I want you to know that we'll do our best to maintain your cover for as long as possible."

"I appreciate that, Peter. I know Klaus will eventually find out, but—"

"Not necessarily," Peter interrupted. "We may be able to avoid having you testify. In any case, don't think about that now."

"I'm not. I'll deal with it later."

"Good. We'll be dressed as guards. Tricia will be stationed at the ticket window during open hours. If you need to leave a message, you'll have your best chance there."

"Once I give you the signal it's starting, could you arrange a diversion ten minutes later? I need to have something to distract Klaus, but not overly alarm him."

"What are you planning?"

"Insurance against the unforeseen."

Neal's idea was risky but worth trying, Peter decided. They were able to come up with a strategy that should provide the cover he needed.

Neal started putting away his books. "Oh, here's a tidbit for you. When Jacek was explaining the programming for the devices, I managed to get a glimpse at his files. Couldn't find anything useful, except possibly this. It was a small symbol of a glowing tree branch. I think the file it was on was connected with the decryption software, but it was all in code. For all I know, this may just be one of the code symbols." He pulled out a sheet of paper hidden within the jacket of his book and gave it to Peter.

Peter looked at the image: a small tree branch with three shoots on the left and two on the right. "It doesn't mean anything to me, but I'll have it researched."

Neal nodded. "There may not be much else to work with. Klaus was shredding papers and deleting files when I left this morning." Glancing at his watch, he said "It's time for me to head off. See ya at the museum, Chewie."

"Good luck, Neal, and take something for that nasty cough before you go."

After Neal left, Peter texted El before heading to the office: "Mission accomplished, and then some." Good thing he had brought along a change of clothes. This was one look he didn't want to reveal to the rest of the team—he'd never be able to live it down.

Notes: It all comes to a head in the next chapter when Neal's worlds collide at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. In the meantime, visit The Woman in Blue board on our Caffrey Conversation Pinterest site if you'd like to see what Peter's disguise looks like. Neal's sketch of the glowing tree branch is also pinned.
Many thanks to Penna Nomen for all the assistance she provides. She's the best Christmas elf ever! And many thanks to you for reading. I love getting your thoughts and comments.
When Worlds Collide

Notes: warning for OC death


On Saturday morning Peter called the team to the conference room for a final briefing. "We should all be in position by six o'clock," he said. "The command center with monitoring equipment was set up on Friday in a storage room in the European Paintings Gallery and the final pieces of equipment put in place this morning. Jones and I'll monitor the video feeds and ultrasonic monitor for Neal's transmitter from there.

"When the museum closes at nine o'clock, all agents report to their assigned locations on the second floor. Outside, the surveillance van will move to the north side of the museum and provide auxiliary monitoring capability. When Neal gives us the first signal, the Code Yellow command will be given for all agents to go to standby status. Once the Code Green activation signal is sent out, we move in and make the arrests. I know the color-coded system is new with this operation, but I'm confident it will aid in communication. It's simple and direct. As a reminder, 'Blue' is the signal to stand down, and 'Red' for suspect on the loose, armed and dangerous."

Turning to Tricia, Peter added, "Once the arrests are made, I want you to take charge of Neal and escort him as quickly as possible into the surveillance van. From there you'll join Travis in coordinating communications if necessary. The rest of us will deal with Mansfeld."

"How about the guard uniforms?" Jones asked.

"The museum sent them over yesterday," Diana said. "They're in the locker room. Peter, in case Mansfeld escapes capture, what do we know of their exit strategy? What has Caffrey been able to find out?"

"They're planning to escape from the roof. As you know from your maps, there are several emergency stairs that give access. If Mansfeld does somehow escape capture, Tricia, make sure Neal doesn't leave your sight. I don't want him involved in what could quickly turn violent. Finally, Neal wanted me to pass on this warning. Mansfeld is capable of using deadly force and is suspected of having used it in the past. My gut's telling me Mansfeld hasn't revealed all his plans to Neal. So don't let your guard down for an instant."


With every passing hour, Peter missed the surveillance van more and more. At least there you could look out the front window. He and Jones had already been encased in this glorified broom closet for over two hours with another three to go. Some of the storage room equipment had been moved out to give them space—barely—for their equipment, but ventilation was minimal.

Outside, Diana was posing as a guard in the Dutch Baroque Masters exhibit. Tricia and two other agents were in the Great Hall monitoring visitors entering the museum in the ticketing area, while several other agents worked as guards throughout the building.

The action had begun at 7:05 p.m. with Neal's arrival. Giving a brief nod at Tricia, he proceeded up the main stairway from ticketing to the European Galleries. Diana reported that, as expected, he sat down in the Impressionists Gallery to sketch.
At 7:30 p.m. Mansfeld had arrived. After heading up the stairway, rather than turning left to the exhibition area, he wandered into the Baroque Paintings Gallery on the second floor.

Now that everyone had arrived, it had turned into a waiting game. Jones had turned on the ultrasonic monitor for any signals from Neal's pen. The equipment had already been tested thoroughly, but Peter was more than a little uneasy to have the success of the entire op hinge on a dog whistle. A dog whistle to take down a leopard—he must have been insane to agree to this.

At 8:00 Diana called in. "Caffrey's gone. I'd just made a sweep of the gallery where he was sketching. He was sitting on a bench, I turned my back, and he vanished."

"What about Mansfeld?" Peter asked. "Any eyes on him?"

"Travis reported he was in the Musical Instruments Gallery at 7:50," Jones reported. "I'll check." He patched through to Travis and after a quick conversation said, "He's still there, studying the early pianos."

At 8:10, Travis called back in. Mansfeld was also gone. Peter and Jones updated the agents to get in their holding positions and wait for the next phase. Museum visitors would be notified to leave at 8:45 with the museum closing at 9. At that point all agents dispersed to their assigned locations on the second floor.

Two galleries away, Neal and Mansfeld were likewise holed up in their storage room. They must be maintaining the same vigilant silence. These rooms had become their foxholes, with both sides hunkered down waiting for the battle to commence.

At 10:45 Peter checked in with Tricia and Diana. They would join him for the initial arrest while other agents would remain on the perimeter to minimize the likelihood of discovery. Peter could feel the first rush of adrenaline starting as he waited for Neal's signal. It couldn't come soon enough at this point.

At 11:00 Jones looked up from his monitor. "First signal—one beep—right on schedule," he reported.

Peter passed the Yellow standby signal to all the agents. "Prepare the broadcast," he ordered Jones. At 11:10, Peter nodded to Jones to start the diversion Neal had requested.

A five-toned chime was heard reverberating through the galleries, followed by a recorded message: "This is a test of the emergency warning system. For the next 60 seconds a test of the emergency warning system will be conducted. This is only a test. In the case of a real emergency, your emergency directions would be relayed after the warning chimes. You should follow the instructions precisely. This concludes the test of the emergency warning system."

Peter and the others took advantage of the recording to move into position just outside the exhibit gallery. At 11:16 Jones relayed Neal's second signal and Peter gave the Code Green command.

"FBI! Freeze!"

Peter, Tricia and Diana swarmed into the exhibition gallery with Jones quickly joining them. The Vermeer was on the floor in front of them, some fifty feet away. Both Neal and Mansfeld, dressed as museum guards and wearing foam latex face masks, were kneeling beside it. Peter could only identify them by their height difference. A black leather case was on the floor next to Mansfeld. Motioning with his gun, Peter ordered, "Hands up! Move away from the painting."

Neal immediately stood up, his hands in the air. Mansfeld moved more slowly. Peter barked, "On
your feet now!"

What happened next was a chaotic blur. Mansfeld brushed his left side as he raised his arms and a loud crackle was heard followed by a burst of blinding light. The gallery was instantly enveloped in a thick swirling haze of white smoke.

His eyes watering, Peter was blinded by the light and smoke. It was impossible to see anything. An instant later he heard Neal shout out, "No!"

Straining to see as he rushed forward, in the confusion all Peter could distinguish were sounds. The sharp pop of a handgun. Shouts. A scuffle. Running footsteps. Diana's voice crying out. More gunfire.

Shouting "Code Red" through his communicator, Peter was still unable to see more than two feet away from him. Neal was sprawled on the floor with Diana beside him. "Mansfeld fled to the northeast. Jones took off after him," she reported.

"He won't escape."

Neal was rubbing his head with a hand, "I'm okay. Go," he urged.

Diana sprinted off after Mansfeld as Tricia took her place with Neal. "I'll handle this, Peter," she assured him.

With a last look at Neal, Peter raced off to join the others.

**WCWCWCWCWCWCWC**

Tricia helped Neal stand up. "Peter's left. You can tell me the truth now. You injured?"

"No, just a few bumps. I saw Klaus pull out his gun. Had to make him miss. He must have struck me with it." He gingerly probed the back of his head. "Was anyone injured?"

"No the shots went wild." As the smoke slowly dissipated, Tricia was able to examine Neal more closely. "Here let me take a look." She gently eased off his face mask. "You've got some swelling going on, but I don't see any blood. Do you feel dizzy?"

"No, I'm good. Being hardheaded has its advantages." He winced as he rotated his neck.

Museum guards were entering the room and Tricia updated them of the status of the situation.

Walking over to the painting, Neal said, "This is the real Vermeer—what Klaus has is my forgery. I switched them. That diversion worked perfectly. I'm sure he doesn't know."

"Good work," Tricia said, proudly. Neal had done everything they'd asked of him and then some. "I'll let Peter know and then we're clearing out. The medics are around the back."

"That's not necessary," Neal protested. "You need to help Travis with communications. I'm not dizzy, I'm not bleeding all over the floor. Stop worrying."

"All right, I believe you. But if the situation changes, you let me know right away. Peter will have my head otherwise."

They left the building and joined Travis in the surveillance van. Looking up briefly from his monitoring equipment, he smiled at seeing Neal. "Welcome back, stranger! Glad the dog whistle worked. Are you all right?" At Neal's nod he continued, "The suspect is still being pursued. He was
"We have to assume he's heading for the roof," Tricia said. She urged Neal into a chair and took a seat next to Travis.

"Most likely he'll make for the American Wing and use the emergency stairs there," Neal said. "That area of the roof has more areas to hide and it's easier to climb down. That's what I'd do anyway."

"We'll make that the highest probability." Tricia got on the line with the various agents.

Peter called in. "I'm heading for the roof. Everything okay in the van?"

Tricia understood by "everything" he meant Neal. "Everything's good at this end. NYPD's setting up additional searchlights around the perimeter." She relayed Neal's advice on the route Mansfeld would take.

For the next several minutes, Tricia and Travis were kept fully occupied coordinating operations and monitoring the feeds. Diana was already in the American Wing. She reported that Mansfeld had been spotted heading up the stairs at the west end. Tricia glanced over at Neal periodically and was relieved to see he was alert and following the feeds intently.

A knock was heard on the van door, and an NYPD officer stuck his head in. "We've got the additional searchlights set up. Do you want to check their locations?"

Tricia looked over at Neal who was already standing up in anticipation. "Feel up to coming out with me?"

"You couldn't keep my away."

"Travis, you're in charge of communications. Keep me informed."

As Tricia and Neal approached the searchlights, Peter called in. "He's on the roof. We got him cornered."

Neal looked like he would grab her earpiece from her. "Is that Peter? What's happening?"

"It's almost over," she reassured him. "Mansfeld's on the roof and should be apprehended shortly."

Neal nodded briefly, the escalating tension etched on his face. Their destination was the northwest corner of the museum. The majority of the searchlights had been directed toward the roof all along the west side which was the most likely avenue of escape.

The Met's roof, site of a rooftop garden terrace, exhibition area, and restaurant, was a complex maze of glass, metal, and stone, rich in hiding areas. Three main building wings projected out along the west facade, making surveillance very difficult. Trees also partially obscured the view from the ground. But police helicopters had joined the operation, their powerful search beams making concealment less likely.

NYPD officers had assembled around the searchlights, scanning the museum with binoculars. Sharpshooters were already in position. Surveying the growing firepower, Tricia felt increasingly uneasy for what was to come. "Time for us to get back in the van, Neal," she urged. "NYPD will handle the arrest."

An officer shouted out, "There he is—climbing down the corner of the north wing."
Quickly swiveling, Tricia was able to make out Peter's head peering over the roof before he disappeared. "Peter must be coming down," she told Neal and stopped to pass word on to the team and alert the van. A line of police officers had formed on the ground below Mansfeld.

"He doesn't have a chance," Neal muttered. "He has to give up."

Shots rang out. Mansfeld was firing at the police as he came down. As the police returned fire, Tricia gipped Neal's arm. A few seconds later Mansfeld plummeted to the ground, landing with a sickening thud about a hundred feet away.

"No!" Neal cried out. Tricia struggled to hold him back but he broke free and rushed to where the police had gathered around Mansfeld. "Let me through!"

The police held Neal back. "Sir, you have to leave."

Tricia ran up, "He's FBI—let him pass."

Mansfeld had been turned on his back, his eyes staring blankly at the sky. Tricia couldn't tell if he was alive or dead as the EMTs worked on him. Neal crouched down beside him.

*This is exactly what Peter wanted to avoid*, Tricia thought with dismay. *I've got to get him out of here*. Placing her arm around him, she said, "Let the medics handle this, Neal. There's nothing you can do." Urging him up, she led him away as the medics placed Mansfeld on a gurney.

Passing a hand over his face, Neal didn't resist as she guided him to an ambulance. Tricia spoke quietly to a medic. "He had an injury to the back of the head and may also be suffering from shock."

The medic nodded. "We'll check him out."

Tricia walked over to the cluster of officers standing around the ambulance containing Mansfeld. The officer who had been monitoring him earlier told her, "We never were able to get a heartbeat."

Tricia nodded grimly. "Between the gunshot wounds and fall, nobody could have survived that."

Peter came running up as she talked with them. Seeing Neal being attended by a medic, he asked worriedly, "What happened?"

Tricia motioned for them to move away from the ambulances. "Neal didn't want to be examined earlier, but the past few minutes have been rough."

His eyes still on Neal, Peter asked, "I heard that Mansfeld was shot. Was Neal there when it happened?"

"Unfortunately. We were standing by the searchlights. When he fell, I couldn't hold Neal back. He raced over to him, but Mansfeld was unresponsive. I just checked—he's been pronounced dead." Tricia looked over at Neal and bit her lip. "Sorry, Peter, I tried to keep him away."

"Not your fault," Peter said wearily. "We thought we had Mansfeld cornered on the roof. Jones had circled around from behind and I was in front. He had jumped on the ledge, and we thought it would end there—that he would give himself up. But then he dropped off the ledge, landed on a projection below, and started climbing down the side of the building. It looked like he'd be arrested once he got to the ground. When he started firing on the police, he determined his own fate."

"Neal's taking it a lot harder than I would have expected," Tricia said. "He may need to talk to
someone about it."

"I agree. I plan to bring it up at the right time."

They walked over to the ambulance where the medic had finished examining Neal. "How is he?" Peter asked.

"Some minor swelling, but no signs of a concussion or more extensive damage," the medic reported. "I gave him some ibuprofen. He'll have a headache for a while. If anything more serious develops such as severe nausea, problems with his vision, or dizziness, he should go to the emergency room."

Neal was standing stiffly by the ambulance. "I'm fine. How about everyone else? Klaus didn't hurt anyone, did he?"

"No, everyone's accounted for," Peter assured him as he slipped off his FBI jacket and draped it over Neal's shoulders.

An NPYD officer walked up carrying the black case. Handing it to Peter, he said "You want to take charge of this? Unfortunately, it's been damaged."

They examined the leather case. The case had not been damaged by the fall but had been pierced by a bullet. Peter opened it and took out the painting inside. A bullet had ripped through the painting, leaving a gaping hole in the center.

Neal stared at it, his already pale face gone chalk-white.

"You saved her, Neal," Tricia said, trying to comfort him. "If you hadn't switched the painting, this would have been the Vermeer."

Neal nodded without taking his eyes off the painting as Peter placed it back in the case. Passing a hand through his hair, he asked Peter, "You going to the townhouse? You'll need my ID card. Save you breaking the door." Neal fumbled for the card in his pocket, but he barely got it out before dropping it on the ground. Staring with dismay at his shaking hand, he said, "Sorry, I—"

Quickly picking up the card, Peter stopped him. "Don't apologize. We're the ones who should apologize for keeping you out here."

"I can manage the situation here," Tricia offered. "It's just cleanup now."

Nodding his thanks, Peter said, "C'mon, Neal, I'll take you home."

"Not necessary. I'm fine. Catch a cab. You need to stay."

"Not open for discussion. We're leaving together."

Peter's car was parked close to the surveillance van and as the two slowly walked back, Neal appeared lost in his own thoughts. When they got to the car, Peter opened the door for him, but he stood motionless. "Neal, get inside. It's time to go home."

"I forgot to give you the pass code to enter the townhouse. You'll need it with the ID card. It's 7349220188. I should have thought of that."

"Thanks," said Peter, writing it down, "but don't concern yourself about that now. Guards have
already been posted at the townhouse. We'll take care of it later. Right now all you need to think about is getting into the car."

Peter drove east on 84th Street heading for FDR Drive. Neal was looking out the side window, but when they passed Fifth Avenue, he turned to Peter. "You missed the turn—this isn't the way."

"I'm taking you to my place. Just for the night."

Shaking his head, Neal put a hand on Peter's arm. "That's not necessary. And you need to get back. My apartment is much closer."

Peter pulled the car over. He'd been afraid Neal would protest. That's why he hadn't mentioned it earlier, but it was for the best. "Listen to me. You've been through a bad shock. You shouldn't be alone. There's no way I'm going to drop you off at June's house."

"But you don't understand. All I need is some time by myself to work through it. June's there. I appreciate what you're trying to do. But, it's okay. I just need to be alone for a while. Please."

Peter studied Neal, weighing his own better judgment against Neal's pleading eyes. "All right," he said quietly and turned the car around.

Peter insisted on going in with Neal. Mounting the stairs to the loft brought back memories of the previous Saturday when Neal had called him about Mansfeld. Hard to believe that was only a week ago.

When they got to the loft, Neal left to shower and change. Peter took advantage of it to make a quick call to Elizabeth to update her. El wanted to jump in a taxi to come over, but he had to talk her out of it. Neal had made it abundantly clear he didn't want anyone around.

"Neal's not going to want me to stay either, hon. Is there anything I can do before I leave?"

"Get him to drink a cup of herbal tea with lots of sugar. That will be the best thing for him."

"Neal's not going to have herbal tea lying around."

"Oh yes, he will. I know Noelle insisted on it when he was going through therapy, and I can't believe he finished the box."

Good thing Neal's kitchen was so tiny. Finding herbal tea couldn't be that difficult, could it? Five minutes of rummaging later, Peter was beginning to change his mind. He had gone through all the drawers once already. How could one guy own much less use all those implements and gadgets? Muttering to himself, Peter poked through the spices one last time. Finally, he found hidden in the back behind a canister of sugar one lone box of "peach tranquility herbal tea." Obviously this had been a favorite.

The tea was brewed and Neal was still taking a shower. Peter was on the verge of knocking on the door when he finally emerged in sweat pants and t-shirt, his hair tousled and still wet. The shower appeared to have done him some good. He still looked exhausted but didn't appear as stressed.

Peter handed him the tea. "Here, drink up. El's orders."

"Peter, you should go home. I'm fine, really."

"I will after you've finished your tea. But call me, or at the very least, text me in the morning. If you don't, I'll be right back on your doorstep. In any case, I'll come by in the afternoon with your
bag from the townhouse."

Neal nodded and took a sip of the tea, making a face. "How much sugar did you put in this?"

"Enough. El said to be generous."

"Turning me into a sugar cube," Neal groused.

Relieved to hear Neal sounding more like himself, Peter squeezed his shoulder. "Try to get some rest. Call me anytime, okay?"

"Thanks, Peter, and thanks for understanding."

On his way out, Peter stopped in the entrance hall and wrote a note to June. He didn't like leaving Neal alone, but Neal wanted the chance to process what had happened. Tomorrow would be soon enough to assess the fallout.

Notes: Peter hated to leave Neal after what happened, and I do too. I've gone ahead and posted the next chapter so you can continue reading. Many thanks to my beta editor Penna Nomen whose suggestions greatly strengthened this chapter. Not an easy chapter for either one of us.

Late Saturday night FBI agents had taken possession of Mansfeld's townhouse. The painstaking work of searching it for evidence began on Sunday morning. After having speculated about it all week, it was an eerie sensation for Peter when he was finally able to walk inside. He had assumed the interior would be luxurious, but the elegance he found was beyond what he had imagined. Antiques, Persian rugs, paintings—it was staggering. Was this the princely lifestyle Neal had grown accustomed to in Europe?

While the other agents worked on the electronics lab in the basement, Peter walked up to the second floor. He found Neal's bag in one of the upstairs bedrooms. On the dresser was a framed photograph of Neal, Mansfeld, and a young woman. She looked to be around 30, pretty, her dark hair cropped short. Chantal? They were in a kitchen. Mansfeld was preparing something on the stove and Neal and the woman were standing by a counter. They must have been making bread since a large mound of dough was on a board in front of them. Both had smudges of flour on their faces and aprons and were hamming it for the camera. Would Neal want the photo or would it be too painful? In any case there was no need for the FBI to confiscate it. Peter put the photograph in his briefcase and continued upstairs.

The studio was on the next floor, looking vast and empty, the easels bare. The cabinets were filled with art supplies, but everything had been neatly stowed away. Peter paused by the wet bar and surveyed the cut glass decanters filled with undoubtedly expensive cognacs and spirits. The crystal brandy snifters. The leather overstuffed chairs. Mansfeld had pulled out all the stops for Neal.

Mid-morning, he received a text from Neal: I'm fine. Painting.

*Fine*—he wished he could believe that. But at least he texted.

By midday the contents of the house had only been partially searched, but the weary team called it quits for the day. A thorough evaluation would continue over the next several days.

Peter went home too. The Yankees were playing. He put the game on, got a beer out of the fridge, and collapsed on the couch. He wished El weren't away at an event. It would have been easier to unwind if she had been home. She could have distracted him with tales from the event-planning world. With the op over, he shouldn't be feeling this tense.

His cell phone buzzed. Hoping it was Neal, Peter was surprised to read "Sherkov" instead on the display.

"I'm sorry to bother you on a Sunday, Peter. I hope you don't mind."

"It's not a problem, Ivan. How can I help?"

"I heard from a colleague at the Met about an attempted theft last night. He said someone had tried to steal a Vermeer painting. May I ask if that was the case Neal and you were working on?"

"Yes, I can't go into details, but we were able to prevent it."

"Is Neal all right? I was told there had been shots fired and casualties."

"Neal received a minor injury—nothing to be concerned about. He may not feel up to going to your
"That won't be an issue." He chuckled. "Sometimes I think he could teach the subject better than me. Please express my gratitude to him. To have lost a Vermeer painting would have been tragic."

"He'll appreciate that very much. Thanks for calling."

Peter put down the phone with a smile. Neal had made some good friends already at Columbia. It was reassuring to know Sherkov had become one of his supporters. Picking up his phone again, he called Neal. This time he got through.

"You holding up okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine." His automatic response didn't nothing to reassure Peter. Someday he'd have to tell Neal, that whenever he said he was fine, Peter was going to assume that meant he was feeling freaked out, insecure, neurotic, and emotional, but he'd hold off for now. "I'm coming over. I have your stuff from the townhouse."

"Sounds good—thanks."

When Peter arrived at the Ellington mansion, June greeted him warmly at the door. "I'm glad to see you, Peter. Thank you for leaving the note. I checked on him first thing this morning and saw him briefly later on when he came downstairs to go out for a run—it looked like he hadn't slept all night. He didn't want to talk. Did the case go as you hoped?"

"We succeeded in achieving our objective, but it came at a cost. Fortunately it's over now. Be patient with Neal—he'll need some time to snap back."

June looked at him with sympathy. "Of course, I appreciate you letting me know. You know I'm here for him too."

Thanking her, Peter headed upstairs where not surprisingly he found Neal at his easel painting.

Looking up when he walked in, Neal said, "Sorry, I should have called more. The time got away from me." Neal put down his brushes and started cleaning up. June was telling the truth. Eyes red-rimmed with exhaustion, he looked like he hadn't slept at all, which knowing Neal, was probably the case.

Peter walked over to the painting. It looked vaguely cubist, all sharp edges, hard planes, and splinters in shades of gray and red. It was unlike anything else he had seen Neal do. The paint was applied in globs so thick, it was like he'd used a shovel instead of a paintbrush. The effect was 3-dimensional, hard, and disturbing. It was a universe away from the Vermeer.

Neal came up behind him. "Like a beer?"

"Sure," said Peter, sitting down at the table. "We searched the townhouse this morning. Thanks for supplying the code and ID card. Saved us having to break the door down." Peter slid over the bag he was carrying. "I think this is everything."

"I'd packed it before leaving yesterday. Thanks." Taking the bag, Neal shoved it under the table without looking at it. "Find anything useful in the townhouse?"

"Don't know yet. The lab boys are going over it with a fine tooth comb. You weren't slumming it the past week, were you? That townhouse makes June's mansion seem almost spartan."
He shrugged. "That was Klaus's world. He took it for granted. His family is one of the wealthiest in Europe. If you'd asked him, he probably would have called the townhouse a rustic retreat."

"Do you mind talking about last night, about how it went down?"

Neal didn't seem particularly upset, but he was difficult to read. "I expected it. This is as good a time as any."

"Did you know about the smoke bomb?"

He shook his head. "That's the first time I've known him to use it. Powerful stuff. Did it damage the paintings?"

"No, we were lucky on that front. It dissipated without leaving a trace."

"That's what I was hoping. I couldn't believe Klaus would have done anything to damage them."

"What happened after Mansfeld activated the bomb?"

"I saw him pull out a gun. My eyes were watering so much it was hard to see, but I knew I had to stop him. I attempted to tackle him, but he must have knocked me down. Things got a little fuzzy then. I can remember hearing shots, voices, Diana helping me up." Neal hesitated for a moment. "Did Diana tell you what happened?"

"I questioned her last night. By staying low to the floor she'd been able to avoid some of the effects of the smoke. She got to you first. She saw Mansfeld had retrieved his gun from the floor. He was standing over you but when he saw her, he took off. It's unclear what he would have done if he hadn't seen her approach. Diana may have saved your life just like you probably saved one or more of us by knocking his gun away when he first pulled it out."

Neal rested his elbows on the table as he considered what Peter had told him. "Hard to believe Klaus would have killed me," he said finally, "but he thought I was the only one who could identify him."

"That's a possibility. No point in trying to figure out what he would have done now."

"I should call Chantal."

"That's not a good idea. We're not releasing any information out about who was killed in the museum and intend to keep your part secret."

Neal nodded absently and got up to pour himself a glass of wine. Instead of returning to the table, he sat on the couch, holding the glass with both hands. Peter was sure he was too tired to think straight.

"You can't blame yourself for any of what happened. You tried your best. He chose his own fate."

"But there's no denying I set the trap. It was my fault he died."

"You're wrong. Mansfeld brought it on himself. If you don't believe it, you might as well blame me. You don't, do you?"

"Of course not!"

"Then you can't fault yourself either. I tried to arrest him on the roof. We had him trapped, and then he dropped off the edge. When he started firing at the police below, he sealed his own fate."
"When I saw him pull out his gun in the gallery, I knew he had to be stopped. But even knowing that . . . Peter, the agents must wonder why Klaus's death affected me so much. I ask that myself. I think it was because there was that other side to him—the side that was my friend—that I couldn't give up on. I thought there was a chance he'd change before it was too late."

"He didn't want to change, Neal. It has to come from inside the person or it won't work."

Neal started to say something then stopped. "Guess I didn't know him as well as I thought," he admitted bitterly.

Peter moved over to the couch next to Neal. "The events of the past week dredged up feelings you thought you'd left behind. For me, they brought back memories of this time last year. I'd brought your case file home to work on. I remember it was September, because I was going through playoff agony with the Yankees back then too."

Neal gave him a puzzled look.

"El and I talked about you. For some reason, she thought you were getting to me. Ha! As if that were likely!" Peter was pleased to see Neal crack a small smile at that. "Anyway, I said something to the effect of what a waste it was for someone with so much potential to be a criminal and wind up in prison, and she challenged me to start a conversation with you. Back then I thought there was little chance I could get you to swerve off the path you'd chosen, but I still wanted to try. The point I'm trying to make is that I get it. You didn't want to give up on Klaus, like I didn't want to give up on you. But, Neal, there aren't many people who can make a change like that. What you did is very rare."

"So you and Elizabeth discussed me. In September. And it wasn't solely about what an annoyance I was. About how I was messing up your life."

"That's right. And go ahead and laugh, but my gut steered me right once again."

"The famous Burke gut."

"Ignore it at your peril."

"I'll remember that, and Peter, thank you. Thanks for listening to that gut, for not giving up on me."

Looking embarrassed, Neal fell silent.

After a few minutes, Peter added, "I picked up the photograph that was in your bedroom in the townhouse. No need to log it into evidence. Figured you might like to have it."

"You did? Thanks, but I don't think I could handle it right now. Could you hold on to it for me? Maybe later."

"Sure thing. Was that Chantal in the photo?"

"Yeah, teaching me how to make brioches as I recall." Neal smiled at the thought. "Chantal wasn't just an expert safecra—sorry, forget that."

"Hey, I'm here as your friend. Anything you say about her is off the record. I'd like to learn more about her. She looked, hmm, very lively in the photo."

"She's one hot chili pepper. Seems more Italian than French. We bonded on safecracking and cooking. The two skills are somewhat related you know—deft touch essential for both. Klaus told me she's retired from safecracking now. You should be very pleased. I'm not bad, but she's a
genius. One time in Salzburg when we were cracking a Stockinger 5200, we thought we were prepared, but it had been customized with a triple baffle and so many side wards, it was taking us forever. The mansion's owner came home early, I wound up getting stuck on the third floor window ledge out in the snow, and Chantal was hiding in the bathtub. Then Klaus showed up and he . . . . " Neal's words trailed off as he looked away.

Peter put a hand on his shoulder. "Give yourself time. Keep reminding yourself that I'm very proud of what you did this past week. It took immense courage and maturity. If you ever want to talk, I'm here for you. Others are too. You know that. Take as much time as you need before coming back."

"Thanks, but I'd rather go back to work right away. If I stayed home, I'd wind up thinking more about it, and I've done too much of that already."

"You could come and stay with us for a few days? You'd have a ride to work."

"It's tempting, but I'd like my own space. Haven't been here in a while, and you're not as close to Columbia."

"Speaking of which, Sherkov called. He was worried about you."

"He was?"

Peter nodded. "He'd heard about what happened at the Met—no details—and wondered if that had been why you were undercover. He asked me to tell you how grateful he is for your help in saving the painting. I told him you might not attend his class tomorrow. He didn't appear to think that was a problem. He said something about you knowing more about the subject than he did."

Neal laughed despite himself. "That's a joke." He hesitated and then said, "I haven't eaten yet. I thought I'd order some takeout. You don't have to leave. You could stay, if you want?"

Peter smiled at him. "I'd like that."

**White Collar Division. September 27, 2004. Monday afternoon.**

It was possibly not his brightest idea to go to work today. Neal looked up from his file on Monday afternoon and gazed around the bullpen. This hadn't gone as he expected.

He had thought, very reasonably, that getting back to work would restore some normalcy. A little routine after the past week was exactly what he needed. And he'd felt on top of his game when he started this morning. He'd finally been able to sleep the previous night, or to be more honest, the previous evening. When had he fallen asleep? Peter was at his place. They'd finished the pizza, and Peter had suggested watching the game. Baseball wasn't high on his list of preferred activities, but it was the least he could do for Peter, and he had to admit watching baseball had a certain mindless appeal at the time. He must have dozed off. When he woke up, it was early morning and he was in bed. Couldn't remember how he'd gotten there. Surely Peter hadn't hauled him there?

Anyway, when morning came, he felt great—raring to go and tackle the world once more. What went wrong?

The morning debriefing was held without a hitch. A little embarrassing how friendly everyone was to him, congratulating him on the op, welcoming him back. Maybe that was it. They were being **too** nice. Threw him off. He felt like his usual silver tongue had turned to rubber. And then when he'd thanked Diana, instead of giving him a hard time, she actually said she'd missed him and liked having him around. That was the final straw. This was not **normal**; it was as if he was out of phase with the rest of the world, or if he wasn't, certainly everyone else was.
And then Peter gave him a stack of what must be the coldest, dullest files ever to exist. They had to be relics from the ice age. He was positive he'd found bits of wooly mammoth fur still clinging to them. Not his fault that he'd fallen asleep not once but several times.

And now, even though it was mid-afternoon, the bullpen was almost deserted. Most of the agents were away on assignment. Peter was off at some meeting. Did Neal really want to go over this copyright infringement case in front of him? Peter had said he could set his own hours this week. Perhaps he should call it a day.

But what did he want to do? Not think, that's for sure.

On the subway ride back to June's Neal considered his options. Knocking about in his loft had zero appeal. He'd done enough of that on Sunday, and besides, if he were alone, his mind would drift back to Klaus, and that was the one thing he knew he had to avoid. He'd been braced for Klaus hating him, cursing him as a traitor. But he had held out a glimmer of hope that in time, Klaus might come to understand and perhaps even forgive him.

No chance of that now. Seeing him on the ground... no, he wasn't going there, not while emotions were so raw. For now he was sweeping the whole mess that was Klaus into the closet and slamming the door shut.

He could work on his painting, but an inner voice was advising him to hold off. Sometimes when he looked at it, he thought it was the best piece he'd ever done. Other times, he hated it and wanted to destroy it. In any case, he had put too much of his soul into it to go back there now.

After changing his clothes, Neal headed for Columbia. He still had hours to go before his evening class, plenty of time to work on something else in his studio.

**Watson Hall, Columbia University. September 27, 2004. Monday evening.**

Jeez, another idea that turned into a gotcha. He should have realized that returning to his studio was a disaster in the making. He had barely walked in when he was assailed by memories of Klaus with him there on Friday. The grief was so overwhelming, he thought he'd be sick. Neal fled to the lounge on the first floor. Fortunately no one was there. He grabbed a spot in the corner and pulled out his laptop. If anyone came in, they'd assume he was working. He pulled up a random photo on his laptop and tried to zone out... .

"Neal, you okay?"

"What...?" Neal jerked his head up to see Richard standing in front of him. Neal made a lame excuse about the photo.

Dropping down next to him and looking over at his laptop which had gone into sleep mode, Richard said, "I can see why you're so fascinated. Riveting work—Nocturne in Shades of Black I assume?"

Neal laughed sheepishly. "Appropriate title."

Richard had the studio next to his. They'd gotten acquainted when they were setting up their work areas, and he was now Neal's closest friend at Columbia. Richard was from New Orleans, which was hard to believe since he didn't have a trace of an accent. They were both going for their master's part-time. Then one evening Neal heard Richard playing the guitar in his studio and discovered they also shared a love of music. Richard was into jazz fusion, quite a change from the angst rock Neal had been playing for the past few years. After everything that had gone on in the
summer, Neal realized striking out in a new direction had a definite appeal. He brought in his own guitar and kept it in the studio. They liked jamming late at night to unwind.

"I've seen you look better," Richard said.

Disgruntled to be so transparent, Neal thought about deflecting, but it didn't seem worth the effort. Perhaps it was time to open that door a crack. "A friend died on Saturday. I haven't come to terms with it yet."

"I'm sorry." Richard looked at him with sympathy. "That has to be devastating."

Neal shrugged an acknowledgment. "I should go. My seminar's due to start." But he made no attempt to stand. Would he fare any better in Sherkov's class? Not likely. With his luck, Vermeer would be the topic. And Neal wasn't so delusional that he thought he could handle that without embarrassing himself further. "On second thought, you free now? How 'bout some music? Your studio? Mine's haunted right now."

"You don't have to twist my arm. I've been working on a Scandinavian piece. It combines Celtic elements, jazz—you need to hear it." Clapping him on the back, he added, "You know, where I come from, you can't help but pick up a little voodoo. You say your studio is haunted. Why not jam in there and exorcise those studio demons you got running amok?"

Neal hesitated, but Richard's enthusiasm was contagious. "A dose of your voodoo magic may be exactly what it needs."

**White Collar Division. September 30, 2004. Thursday morning.**

It was a rainy, cold Thursday morning—the kind of day which made catching up on paperwork a pleasure. As Peter sat at his desk, steaming mug of coffee beside him, he looked out at the rain bespattered window and sighed in contentment. The White Collar workplace was back to normal. The investigation of the townhouse had been wrapped up. Agents were working on new cases. Neal was no longer wandering around like a lost zombie.

Peter had been sorely tempted to force him to stay away those first few days, but he suspected that would have done more harm than good. Giving him those mind-numbingly boring cold cases to work on had proven very effective. Even if he wasn't sleeping at night, he was sleeping enough working on them, that it probably balanced out.

His phone rang. Saving the document he was working on, Peter picked it up to find Hughes on the line.

When he hung up, he gave Neal a call. "Hughes wants to see us both now, in his office."

"What's going on?" Neal asked.

"No idea. Meet me upstairs."

Hughes motioned them to sit down when they entered his office. "Caffrey, I have some news for you, and since this also concerns Peter, I'd like him to be present. I'll get to the point. You're no doubt aware that I had some doubts about your joining us, and I don't mind telling you I gave Peter a rough time before agreeing to it. But the events of the past few months and particularly your assistance with the Léopard have proven to me how right Peter was to recruit you."

Neal looked stunned. "I'm honored, sir."
Hughes held up a hand. "I'm not done. I've ordered a special commendation to be placed on your
record for your assistance with the Leopard. Keep up that standard and you'll go far with us."
Standing to shake Neal's hand, Hughes said, "That's all. Get back to work, you two."

Once outside, Neal asked Peter in astonishment, "Did you have anything to do with this?"

"Not me," said Peter with a grin. "It was all Hughes, and all you. Look, everyone here understands
what a difficult op this was for you. You earned this and more."

"Wow—do I get a certificate for the wall? A lapel pin?" Neal's eyes sparkled mischievously.

"No, just bask in the glow and enjoy the moment. These don't come all that often."

Neal paused at the stairs and asked, "There were some loose ends to the case. Do you have time for
a few questions?"

"Come to my office," he said and, closing the door behind them, motioned for Neal to take a seat.
"Lay 'em on me."

"For one thing, Marta and Jacek. What's happening with that?"

"Interpol is keeping them under surveillance, but for the time being no other action is being taken.
The hope is they'll unknowingly alert us to more activity in the future. Since they didn't commit a
crime, they can't be arrested."

"Do you know what happened to their son?"

"Unfortunately, he didn't make it. Died on Sunday."

"I was afraid of that," Neal said softly as he rubbed the back of his neck. "At least they returned in
time to be with him."

"You should also know that we were successful in keeping your name out of the report to Interpol.
The only ones that know of your undercover work with Mansfeld are with the Bureau. As I
mentioned before, this should have no bearing on your dealings with 'the dark side.' Also, in all the
local reports about the attempted robbery, the thief was never mentioned by name. The FBI,
Interpol, and his family of course are the only ones who know about Mansfeld."

"I appreciate that," Neal said. "Any progress in finding out who sold him the decryption program?"

"Nothing yet. That will take a while. We've alerted Interpol. Eventually something will turn up.
Anything else?"

"Just one thing more. I never really thanked you properly for all you did. Going to Columbia all
those times, those aliases,—"

Peter interrupted, "You were the one laying everything on the line. It was the least I could do."

"You and Elizabeth both went way beyond that, and I'm very grateful. I wanted you to know and
also try to make up a little for all those missed meals you had to endure. If you're free, I'd like to
take both of you out Saturday night."

Peter had already been worried about the upcoming weekend. He hadn't wanted Neal to be alone
with his thoughts of what had happened the previous Saturday but didn't know if he'd welcome
company. "Actually, we were going to ask you over."
"Please allow me. I'd like to take you to La Palette. I believe you've only seen the outside. It's high
time for you to have the full experience. It may not be La Dordogne, but you won't have to wear a
tie and you'll probably like the food better. You can even have genuine French fries." Neal paused
and added, "La Palette is one of my favorite places. It needs some happier memories."

"It'd be our pleasure," Peter said with a smile. "El's been after me to take her there for a long time.
Just remember to speak English this time."

Notes: Thanks for reading and special thanks to Penna Nomen for the many suggestions she made.
Neal is looking forward to turning the page and having a festive dinner with Peter and El at La
Palette. I hope you'll join them there when the next chapter is posted. I plan to post a day early, on
Wednesday, December 31, to help ring in the New Year.

The conversation that Peter and El had about Neal a year ago is described in the first story of the
series, Caffrey Conversation by Penna Nomen. She begins posting a new story, Caffrey Disclosure,
on December 28, which takes place in the summer before Neal started his studies at Columbia. For
followers of the series, this follows Complications and is before The Golden Hen.
"You've wanted to go to La Palette for months," Peter said to Elizabeth as they walked to the bistro from their parking space. "What makes it so special?"

"Two things: the bistro serves classic French cuisine similar to what we'd get on the Left Bank of Paris, or so I'm told. That's also on my wish list, you know. But until that happens, this makes a good substitute. According to the reviews La Palette has a Parisian atmosphere without any pretentions. And then there's the art."

"What about the art?"

"The owner's an artist himself, and the walls are covered with works by contemporary New York artists. A clever gimmick to the bistro is that the artists who are chosen to display their works receive a discount off their tabs. It's a winning strategy for everyone involved. For the artists, they receive the free publicity in addition to the discount. For the bistro, the art is a unique and powerful draw to attract a well-heeled, cultured clientele, and for the patrons, not only are they able to enjoy the art but they also have the opportunity to mingle with the artists themselves."

"I bet Neal has a painting hanging there. He couldn't resist a deal like that."

"Do you know if he comes here often?"

"He told me it's one of his favorite places, but the first time I heard him mention it was as the location for his first meeting with Mansfeld. That was exactly two weeks ago today."

"No wonder he'd like some happier memories. Let's make sure that happens," she said as they walked inside.

They spotted Neal standing by the long carved walnut bar at the front of the bistro. "They should hire him to sit there," El murmured. "He looks dashing in that dark blue open-collared shirt and sports jacket. But he looks thinner than I remember. Has he lost weight or is he simply giving off an artist vibe?"

Peter scrutinized him. He looked different away from work, and definitely on the thin side. Plainly a man who could use more beer and pizza in his diet.

Neal was talking with a stocky, gray-haired man behind the bar and motioned them over. "Elizabeth, Peter, I'd like you to meet Jacques Legault, the owner and master chef of La Palette."

Jacques walked around the counter to greet them. "So you are the famous Burkes of whom I've heard so much! Enchanté, madame, your beauty graces my establishment," he said as he kissed El's hand. "And, monsieur, to you I owe a great debt of gratitude," he added with a welcoming handshake.

"Thank you, I think, but I'm not following you," said Peter with a puzzled smile.

"Ah, you don't know? I used to live in constant fear of being the scene of an FBI raid whenever Neal was here. I had nightmares of him being chased by agents through the kitchen and causing my soufflés to collapse. I and my soufflés thank you for making a honest man out of him."
"Jacques, you mustn't give him a swelled head," Neal protested. "The FBI never knew when I was in New York, let alone in your bistro. My record stands unblemished—not a single takedown."

"You were in our sights, Caffrey. We would have caught you within the month," Peter joked.

"Would have, could have, should have, pfff!" Neal said breezily with a dismissive wave.

"Come, let me show you to your table," said Jacques. "Neal, a new shipment of Volnay arrived from the Clos des Ducs. You and your guests must do me the honor of being my wine tasters tonight. I'd like you to let me know if it's acceptable before I serve it to my patrons. You may need to try two bottles before you make your decision," he said with a wink. "Bon appétit, everyone!"

"Neal this place is fantastic," El said after Jacques had left. "Thank you so much for inviting us." Gazing around at the paintings she added, "I could spend hours simply looking at the art. Do you have a painting displayed?"

"There is that rumor."

"Any hints on which one?" asked Peter.

"Oh, I think the master FBI agent who was on the verge of catching me would have no problem deducing which one is mine."

A waiter brought over the wine for Neal to taste.

"Ah, yes, that will do nicely," Neal said and the waiter proceeded to fill the immense glasses in front of them. Raising his glass, Neal said, "A toast: Here's to family. Not just the one you're born with but the ones who let you in . . . and are there for you. Cheers!"

As they clinked glasses, Peter added, "And here's to finding the best son one could hope to have, even if he was in the back of a stolen rental car!" Neal looked at him startled and broke out in an unexpectedly shy smile.

"Well done, Peter," El murmured in his ear. Turning to Neal she asked, "You and Jacques appear to be old friends. How long have you known each other?"

"I never knew the French could make such a delicious steak," said Peter with a deep sigh of contentment as their plates were being whisked away by an efficient waiter. "And those fries were wonderful—I didn't even have to ask for ketchup."

"Now that's a high compliment," said Neal. "Jacques will be overjoyed. He should make that the bistro's motto. I can see it now, emblazoned in gold letters over the door, 'Our fries are so good you won't need ketchup!'"

"All right, I can tell when I'm being mocked. But they were good," said Peter as he drained his glass of the last of the wine. "The wine's quite acceptable too by the way. Jacques can rest easy in serving it."

"Yes, somehow I don't think he was worried," agreed Neal.

"I'm so glad you suggested the duck and green peppercorn terrine. It was exquisite," said El. "I wish I could persuade Jacques to help me with the catering for some of my events. Do you think he would be interested?"
"Quite possibly. He's recently hired an excellent sous chef and he may have the time. Has everyone saved room for dessert?"

"Before that, I have a little something for you," El said as she drew out a package from her purse. "Actually this comes from my friend, Janet Dodson—"

Peter let out a groan. "Oh no, I need to censor this first."

"Ignore him," said El, as Neal's eyes sparkled with anticipation. "Janet's a wardrobe supervisor, and you may not realize that she played an instrumental role during your op. I thought you'd like to have this as a memento."

Neal ripped open the package to find a framed photo of Peter in his Saturday morning disguise. With a wide grin he said, "Peter, I must have this autographed."

Valiantly attempting to muster his sternest look, a process that had been made more difficult by the amount of wine consumed, Peter warned, "You understand, this is for your eyes only, and not to be seen by anyone else in White Collar, and I'm speaking now as your supervisor with full rights to suspend and fire."

"That could perhaps be negotiated. But in return I would expect something back. Perhaps a look at that letter of recommendation you wrote to Columbia?"

"Sounds like a fair exchange to me," seconded El.

"Hmm. It appears I may need to reconsider my stand."

"I would suggest sometime soon would be appropriate, preferably before October 24," Neal continued.

"What's happening on the 24th?" asked El.

"Columbia's holding its annual Family Day and I wondered if you two would like to take part? I'm inviting Noelle also. Family Day is primarily for freshmen, but this year the art department is going all out for the grad students too. On Sunday, the 24th, there'll be an open house at the studios, reception in the Art Gallery—"

"Neal, that sounds wonderful," Elizabeth said. "We'd love to go. I'm ashamed to admit in all the years we've lived here I haven't taken the time to explore the Columbia campus."

"Great—I could introduce you to my professors. You've heard so much about Sherkov, you need to meet him."

**Neal never ceases to surprise a person,** thought Peter. "Family Day, I like the sound of that," Peter said aloud. "Also helps to reinforce my parental role of authority which seems to be forgotten rather easily."

"Hey, it's not my fault if when I look at you I see Chewie," Neal replied, looking at the photograph and resisting Peter's attempts to grab it away. "Now, who's up for chocolate soufflé?" he asked as he beckoned over the waiter.

Gazing at Neal's smiling face it was hard not to believe that all was right in his world once more. But turning off his radar was one mistake Peter wasn't going to make again. The trouble with Neal was he was such an expert con, it was second nature to him. Was he simply trying to reassure them that everything was all right now? Or was he conning himself that he was over the events of the
previous week?

But that discussion would be for another time. On an evening like this, there was no need to worry about the future or the past. Just enjoy the moment. Peter responded with a smile, "Count me in!"

**White Collar Division. October 11, 2004. Monday noon.**

"Then I took out my plasma rifle and obliterated the Elite that had been sniping at me. Spinning around I tossed a couple of fragmentation grenades at the Jackal and he was toast." Diana paused and added with a grin, "I was kicking some Covenant butt."

"Okay, I'll grant a FPS like *Halo* has its moments, but you miss out on the complex strategizing and open-ended freedom of a MMORPG like *World of Warcraft*," countered Jones. "The gameplay of *World of Warcraft* is totally immersive and sophisticated. Master Chief is just a mindless killing machine."

"Hey, I'll stack my energy sword against your thrash blade any day," Diana said hotly.

"See what you started, Tricia. This is all your fault," Peter said. It had all started innocently enough. It was pouring rain outside and so after a late morning meeting the team had decided to order in Chinese food for lunch, and Peter along with Tricia, Jones, Diana, and Neal had camped out in the break room with their takeout bags.

"How was I to know?" Tricia said. "All I said was that my son wanted to get a video game and did they have any suggestions. I had no idea what a hornet's nest that would cause. I'd never heard of MPS—"

"FPS, Tricia," said Diana. "First-person shooter to the uninformed," she added, looking directly at Peter.

"Would anyone like to enlighten me on what that the M and M thingy was?" said Tricia.

"Massively multiplayer online role-playing game," said Jones.

"Neal, you're not throwing in your two-cents," said Peter. "Don't tell me this is one area you're not an expert."

"I always felt chess was a more stimulating game," Neal said with a shrug and deftly intercepted the fortune cookie missile that was promptly hurled at him by Diana.

"Never too late to be converted," encouraged Jones. "After all we shouldn't be too harsh on you, what with your misspent youth and all. You were too busy hustling pool to learn the more sophisticated, exacting skills required for video gaming. I could tutor you in exchange for some Tuesday Tail tips. RTS would be right up your alley."

"Yeah, Caffrey, RTS is perfect for you," Diana ribbed. "Very cerebral—no coordination necessary."

"Not another acronym! I'm done," Peter groaned.

"Real-time strategy like *Age of Empires*," explained Jones. "Think about it, Neal, you might like it."

"Maybe," Neal sounded dubious.
"This is the perfect opportunity. Next weekend is N-Con. I'm going. You should go with me."

"What is N-Con?" asked Tricia.

Jones looked astonished. "What planet are you living on? Simply the largest gaming convention on the East Coast. Three days of gaming nirvana. It's not just exhibitor booths, but you have the chance to try out the latest games and the latest hardware. There are freeplay game areas, tournaments, LAN parties,—"

Diana interrupted, "Yeah, but you go just for the booth babes."

"They're not bad either." Jones admitted with a grin. "Seriously, Neal, what's your class schedule like next weekend? Even if you're tied up on Saturday, we could go on Sunday."

"You should go," seconded Peter. "You need a new skill."

"In that case, why don't you go too?" Neal countered.

"I have something even better—a wife. Also, work to do, something the rest of you may want to think about doing sometime today."

Going up to his office, Peter couldn't resist a smile. It had been a long time since Neal had looked so happy and relaxed. Neal had been restricted to desk duty for the past two weeks. The other task force members did not know how close Neal had been to Mansfeld but they were fully aware of the reintegration difficulties any agent faced after a long undercover mission. The banter meter readings had been off the charts lately, and the strategy appeared to be working.

Later in the afternoon when Neal dropped a case file off, Peter took the opportunity to talk to him.

"Think you're ready for field work again?"

"I've been ready for a while," Neal said as his face lit up. "The first few days, I admit, were a little rough, but I'm over that now."

"Sleeping all right?"

"Sure, why not?"

"Have you spoken with Noelle about what went on?" In the aftermath of the Flashback operation last spring, Neal had continued to check in with his aunt via weekly therapy sessions for his child abuse issues. He hadn't mentioned talking to her lately, but Peter assumed the therapy was ongoing.

Neal waved it off dismissively. "No need. I'm fine. I stopped sessions with her in the summer. And as far as Mansfeld, the best therapy for me has been getting back to work and doing my job."

"Spoken with your cousin Henry about it?"

"No," Neal said shortly, giving a small huff. "Peter, look, if I bring this up with Henry then I'd have to go into how I met Klaus, and more to the point why I left for Europe which will stress him and me too. I'm ready to close the chapter on that whole experience."

Peter could understand where he was coming from. He hated it when people were overly solicitous. But his radar was pinging him that Neal was conning himself about how fine he actually was. It was time to find out. "All right, you got it," he said. "Business as usual. No special treatment."
"Thanks, Peter." Neal said with a grin. "It was beginning to cramp my style. I was starting to worry I'd lost my ability to annoy the hell out of you."

"I'm sure you'll regain that mastery in no time."

The opportunity for field work didn't take long to arrive. The next day Peter caught Neal as he was returning from the file room. "Get your coat. We're heading to Brooklyn."

"Any particular reason you're pulling me off this fascinating mortgage fraud? Is Satchmo lonely?"

"No, smart guy. There's been a robbery at the Brooklyn Museum."

"Really?" Neal looked more interested. "What was taken?"

"Some Roman antiquities—a sword and some gold coins. The museum authorities just reported the theft," Peter said.

"Not the Sword of Tiberius?"

"That's right. You've heard of it?"

"It's world-famous," Neal said, looking excited. "One of the very few swords to survive from ancient times, it was on loan from the British Museum along with some other artifacts. They're part of a special exhibit on Roman and Greek antiquities."

"I'm glad to hear this is up to your standards," Peter said with a smile. "C'mon, the others are waiting for us."

At the Brooklyn Museum the White Collar team was met by Daniel Tompkins, the assistant curator of antiquities. He led them to the exhibition area on the third floor next to the Egyptian Art Gallery. "Our exhibition, Treasures of the Ancient World had just opened last week," he lamented. "This display case held the Sword of Tiberius, Roman and Greek coins as well as several examples of fine Hellenistic jewelry."

The display case was intact, with no broken glass. Once the case was examined and dusted for fingerprints, team members dispersed to search for other forensic evidence. Neal, however, stayed behind to study its contents. What it contained simply didn't add up.

Peter approached him. "What's bothering you?"

"The thief took the sword and the scabbard, but he left the jewelry alone. Peter, that doesn't make sense. These are remarkable pieces, both Hellenistic and Roman, and are worth much more than the sword. Not only are they more valuable, but they're also much more impressive to look at. Why take the sword and not these? The thief also didn't take these small ivory sculptures which are miniature masterpieces. And then look at the coins. These Greek silver drachmas are very rare. They're much more valuable than the gold aurei, but only the aurei were taken. It doesn't add up."

Jones walked up. "I just checked with security. No alarms or sensors were set off."

"They first noticed the pieces gone this morning," Diana added, "but they don't know when they were actually stolen."
Neal opened the case and examined the sensor device. "Jones, look at this."

Jones scrutinized the sensor. "I don't see anything."

"Exactly. The device is pristine, no scratches, no gouges. It hasn't been tampered with. I also couldn't find any signs of the case being forced open. Did you?"

"No, none."

Peter broke in, "So how did the thief open the case?"

Neal stood up. "Two possibilities come to mind. Either one of the security people turned off the sensor or the thief possessed a decryption device which overrode museum security."

Peter's face flashed recognition. "What you're describing is the same sort of device Mansfeld used."

"Precisely."

"I'll interview security about the system they use and arrange to have it analyzed," Jones said. "We'll also need a copy of their data records."

Peter strode off to check in with other team members, and Neal took the opportunity to get a better feel for the floor plan. The space set aside for the exhibit was at the end of a series of galleries devoted to ancient Egypt. The Egyptian collection at the Brooklyn Museum was one of the finest in the world and had recently gone through an extensive reinstallation.

The north wall was broken up at several points with floor-to-ceiling glass panels. Neal walked over to the windows and looked out. A panoramic view of the sculpture garden below stretched out before him.

The sculpture garden consisted of an eclectic collection of ancient statues, modern sculptures and architectural fragments. There were even limestone sculptured keystones from demolished buildings. One keystone in particular caught his eye—the head a king wearing a crown. It was lying on the ground and appeared to look straight up at him. Neal was struck by the expressiveness of the face. The eyes had an intensity which bore into him, challenging him... accusing him.

As Neal continued to stare at the head, he felt himself growing dizzy as the king's eyes grew larger. Blinking, he tried to step back but his feet seemed to be cemented in place. He swallowed back a surge of nausea...

Suddenly with a rush of flapping wings a hawk flew off from the ledge below and snapped him out of it. Neal backed away from the window, breathing heavily.

Peter came up from behind. "See anything?"

Rapidly getting himself under control, Neal shook his head. "No, nothing useful."

"You all right?" Peter studied him, looking concerned.

"Yeah, fine. When I looked out, I must have startled a hawk that was perched on the ledge below. Caught me by surprise, that's all." Neal passed a quick hand over his hair and took a breath, "I was in the midst of surveying the floor layout. No matter when the robbery happened, the thief would have needed a staging area. The most likely spot would be that fire escape in the southeast corner."
"Let's check it out."

As they walked over to the fire escape. Neal said, "One likely scenario would be that the thief entered the museum during normal museum hours. Hid in the fire escape overnight, snatched the pieces, and then left when the museum opened the next day. He could have easily opened the fire escape without setting off the alarm. Observe and learn." Neal pulled out a credit card. A couple of swift manipulations later and the door opened silently.

The stairwell was bare. No papers or debris to examine. Neal said, "I'd dust the fire escape door, both sides. It's the most likely spot to find fingerprints."

They headed back to the others, where Peter ordered the additional fingerprint sampling. Neal went back to the exhibit case and then checked out the others in the vicinity.

Peter walked up. "We'll circulate descriptions of the items to pawn shops and check with our contacts. Will you ask Mozzie? I assume he's back in town."

Neal nodded. "I got a message from him. He returned last week."

"You don't think he was involved with this, do you?"

"No, Mozzie would have gone for the more valuable pieces."

"Everything okay with you two?"

"Yeah, I've just been busy—work, classes. I'll get in touch with him."

On the return trip from Brooklyn, Neal couldn't get the image of the king out of his mind. He'd been affected by works of art before, but that was almost an out-of-body experience. Maybe he was burning the midnight oil too much? Better catch up on some sleep tonight.

Notes: True confession time: I got a special pleasure in having Neal boast about never having been caught after Peter bragged so often about catching him in canon. Many of you no doubt recognized Peter's comment at La Palette about not thinking about the future but enjoying the moment as having come from Season Three's "Stealing Home" episode. Several other episodes were referenced at the dinner, including Neal's toast which is a nod to Season Four's "In the Wind." The account of how Peter found Neal in the back of a stolen rental car is in Caffrey Conversation by Penna Nomen.

In the next chapter, Neal has a moment of clarity as the agents search for the Sword of Tiberius.

If you'd like to see photos of Jacques Legault, the Sword of Tiberius, and the king's head that Neal sees at the Brooklyn Museum, they're pinned on The Woman in Blue board at our Caffrey Conversation Pinterest site. The king's head is actually in the sculpture garden at the Brooklyn Museum. The Sword of Tiberius is displayed at the British Museum.

Thanks to Penna Nomen for keeping me on track and being so amazingly patient with all the questions I pepper her with. Her ideas continually inspire me. In this chapter the dinner at La Palette originated from a comment she made.

Blog: Penna Nomen & Silbrith Conversation: www.pennasilbrithconversation.blogspot.com
Chapter Visuals: The Woman in Blue board at the Caffrey Conversation Pinterest website:
A Moment of Clarity

October 12, 2004. Tuesday evening.

On a typical Tuesday, Neal headed to Columbia after work for art workshops, but this evening's session had been canceled, and he lingered at the Bureau longer than usual. Going back to his apartment had no appeal. Not that he was dreading his meeting with Mozzie. . . .

Jones had also worked late. Persuading him to go for a drink at Foley's Tavern required no arm-twisting. Foley's was a little over a block away from the Federal Building. Comfortable and unpretentious, it was the favorite watering hole for the White Collar team. Over drinks, Jones spent the next hour rhapsodizing on the delights of video gaming. Neal had no idea Jones was such an avid gamer, but he'd long had the feeling that somewhere underneath that cool professional exterior there lurked a wilder side itching to burst out and here was the proof. And although Neal wasn't prepared to embrace it himself, the world of video gaming was intriguing.

It was 7:30 by the time Neal returned home. Mozzie was due to arrive shortly. As Neal walked upstairs, he chided himself for being so reluctant to meet with his friend. Peter had assured him nothing had been leaked out, and he shouldn't have heard anything about Neal's undercover work with Mansfeld. But Mozzie had an uncanny way of finding out what should be impossible to know. Usually that was an asset. It was unsettling for that not to be the case this time. How could Neal possibly explain his actions to Mozzie?

Neal opened a bottle of wine and waited. It wasn't long before Mozzie knocked.

"Hey, Mozz. Trying out a new knock? That's not iambic pentameter."

"Codes change, mon frère," he replied with a knowing smile. "I'd been using the other one for too long. Someone could have heard it."

"I suppose I could get used to anapestic trimeter," Neal said, reflecting on Mozzie's latest eccentricity. "It has more of a lilt. Wine?"

"Of course."

"How was Europe? You're looking more . . . continental." Mozzie was wearing a turtleneck with silk scarf wrapped around his neck, a beret on his head.

"Very lucrative and spiritually rewarding. Paris beckoned. I did a job with Gordon Taylor." He sat down at the table opposite him.

Neal gave a low whistle as he poured a glass for himself. "Gordon Taylor, not bad, not bad at all. You've really gone upscale. I never worked for him, but if half of what I've heard about him is true, it'd be an amazing experience."

"You should consider joining his crew for the occasional job. You're kindred souls. Gordon treats everyone with respect and pays exceedingly handsomely whether or not the job is successful. He never hurts anyone."

Neal looked at him, amused. "Do I sense a budding bromance? Why didn't you stay in Paris?"

Mozzie shrugged. "New York keeps calling me back to her despite my best intentions. Besides, I needed to check you hadn't been brainwashed by the suits. They haven't corrupted your soul yet,
"Soul still intact, I'm happy to report."

"Glad to hear it. You know I called Peter, I assume?"

"Thanks for the concern, but it was unnecessary. I was fine."

"We're living in dangerous times," he said, taking a sip of his wine. "If it can happen to the Leopard, no one's safe."

"What about the Leopard?" asked Neal uneasily.

"He was killed a couple of weeks ago. Didn't you hear?"

"I hear a rumor but figured it was just smoke and mirrors. You know how he operates. He's probably planning some heist and wants to throw others off the scent."

"My source was certain," Mozzie said, "and he's never been wrong on something like this. I hate to say it, but it has to be true. I haven't been able to discover yet where the hit occurred or which Gestapo agency killed one of the shining lights of our world, but I'm working on it."

Neal walked over to the patio doors. Gazing out at the lights of the city, he rubbed the back of his head. "This is ... a shock. Klaus gone..."

After a minute he turned to Mozzie and said, "You better not investigate. It could raise suspicion and increase your own profile. You're much safer living in the shadows."

"You're right. Anonymity is my hallmark. But never fear, I'll be careful." Mozz walked over to stand beside him. "I realize how distressing this must be for you. You two were so close."

"I haven't seen him in two years—we'd drifted apart, but do you mind if we talk about something else?"

"Excellent idea—best not to dwell. I could tell you about the heist I pulled with Gordon. Several instructive concepts may be gleaned from his leadership style. His access to rare vintages of wine for one thing is truly outstanding."

"Actually, I'm working on another case and I'd like your help." Neal said hastily, cutting short Mozzie's encomium. "Someone stole the Sword of Tiberius and several Roman coins—gold aurei—from the Brooklyn Museum."

"It wasn't me," Mozzie said wistfully.

"I didn't think so. It was an unusual profile. Only these items were taken and more valuable items left alone. Could you check around? See if anyone's heard anything?"

"Reward?"

"Naturally."

It was late when Mozzie finally left. He was still wound up about Gordon Taylor and insisted on relating several undoubtedly highly embellished stories of his exploits while polishing off the wine. Neal suspected he was also trying to distract him from his revelation about the Leopard.

So much for getting caught up on sleep. Mozzie's words had struck uncomfortably close to home.
Had his soul been corrupted by the FBI? Several months ago he never would have betrayed Klaus to the FBI, and now … What did this mean for his friendship with Mozzie?

His report on Gordon Taylor was fascinating. The man was legendary. If Neal had wound up with him rather than Klaus, he might still be in Europe, a member of Gordon's crew. He'd have gone down a totally different path.

But why was he even thinking about that? Why couldn't he be more like Peter? Peter never doubted, never second-guessed. The man was a rock. And Neal? He was a square of origami paper waiting to be folded. After assuming one shape, he'd then unfold and refold himself into another shape.

After tossing around in bed for several minutes more, Neal finally flung the sheets off in frustration. Sleep simply wasn't coming, not with Mozzie, Klaus, and Peter waging war in his head. Neal knew from long experience there was only one solution to shut thoughts like that out.

Getting up, he pulled out his paints. Studying the blank canvas in front of him, Neal loaded his brush with burnt umber and made short jabbing strokes on the canvas. Slowly a form began to emerge.

**White Collar Division. October 13, 2004. Wednesday.**

Midday on Wednesday, Peter called the team together for an update on the Brooklyn Museum robbery. "We got a match on one of the fingerprints taken at the museum," he announced.

"Where was the fingerprint located?" Neal asked.

"Funny you should ask. On the inside of the fire escape door, which I was reliably told was a likely place. The fingerprint belongs to Thomas Slattery," and Peter projected his photo on the screen. "He served time for bank robbery several years back. Suspected in several art crimes and blackmail schemes, but escaped being convicted. Lives in Boston."

"So far nothing has come to light from the pawn shops," Diana reported.

"I doubt there will be," said Neal. "This was too specialized a job for it to be pulled by someone trying to get quick cash. And the sophistication of how the crime was carried out points to someone highly skilled in this area." He considered a moment. "It has to be a special commission. Someone wanted those items and nothing else. Otherwise, why only take the sword and the coins and leave the other more valuable items behind? But I can't figure out what particular significance a sword and a few coins would have."

"Tricia, were you able to trace any local connection?" asked Peter.

"He has a sister who lives in Queens, name of Mary Slattery," Tricia replied.

"Does the sister have a record?" Diana asked.

Tricia glanced at her notes. "Nothing major. Tried to pass a counterfeit check once."

Peter turned to Jones. "Did you discover anything from an analysis of the security protocol, Jones?"

"There was nothing suspicious with the security guards. The regular guards were on duty, and all have exemplary service with the museum. However, when we tested the security program software for signs of tampering, we found this." Jones pulled up an image on the screen of a glowing tree
Neal exchanged looks with Peter. "We've seen that before."

"That's right," said Jones. "It's the same symbol you found in the decryption program at Mansfeld's house. But this time the hacker was more brazen. The symbol popped up as a standalone image when we ran our testing program. The hacker didn't go to any effort to disguise it. It was as if he were boasting."

"So now we're dealing with two issues: the hacker and the thief," said Peter, wrapping up the briefing. "For now our focus is on the thief. We find him, he may lead us to the hacker. That will also tell us what makes the Sword of Tiberius so special. The arrest warrant came through an hour ago so get ready to move out. Tricia, Jones, Diana, you'll be with me. Neal, you'll monitor communications with Travis in the van."

Not the most exciting assignment he'd ever had, but at least it was away from the office. Being restricted to office duty over the past two weeks had been rough. It reminded Neal of when he first started at White Collar and how awkward he'd felt. It was difficult to feel like a member of the team when everyone else was going out on assignment and he wasn't. Desk jobs and Neal Caffrey were not a match made in heaven, that was clear. Maybe that's why he hated van duty so much—it reminded him of being stuck behind a desk.

WCWCWCWCWCWCW

The address in Queens turned out to be an apartment in a row of tenement buildings, a block of identical, dreary red brick boxes, five stories tall. Aging fire escapes zigzagged their way through the upper floors. Small air-conditioning units poked out like accordions from grimy windows.

Getting out of the van with Tricia, Diana, and Jones, Peter rang the doorbell for the sister's apartment. No answer. Peter rang for the superintendent and after several rings, a Hispanic man in coveralls, tools bristling out his pockets, came to the door.

"What's this all about?" the frazzled superintendent demanded impatiently. "I've got a clogged sink in 4B and 5A just flooded their bathroom. This better be important."

"We're here to see Mary Slattery, Apartment 3C," Peter said.

"Well, you're outta luck. Mary's been out of town for several days."

"We have a warrant to search her apartment."

"How about I give you the key? Bring it to me when you're done, unless you've already been washed out onto the street. If I don't get back to 5A, we may need to all take to the lifeboats." The superintendent hauled out a massive key ring from his coveralls and extracted a key. "If you see any standing water, give me a holler," he warned gloomily then lumbered back upstairs.

There was no elevator in the building, and the agents walked upstairs to the third floor. Once outside the apartment, they drew their weapons and prepared to enter. Glancing around to see everyone was ready, Peter gave the command.

"FBI! Freeze!"

No answer. No sounds of running feet, no sounds at all. The front room was clear, and the agents fanned out to search the other rooms. Diana headed for the bedroom. "Boss, in here," she called out.
Lying on his back on the bed was Thomas Slattery, fully dressed, with a bullet hole in the forehead. His eyes were wide open, a look of surprise frozen on his face.

Tricia rushed to his side. "He's still warm. It must have just happened."

"Spread out, everyone. His killer may be close," Peter shouted.

**WCWCWCWCWCW**

"How do you do it? Every time we go in the field, it seems like you wind up with van duty. And rather than complain about it, you actually seem to relish it. What's your secret?" Neal looked at Travis with curiosity. He didn't want to insult him, but it was unfathomable to Neal how he could put up with such long hours in the van and not go stir crazy. Or maybe that was the secret. He already was.

"You're not looking at it the right way," Travis replied without taking his eyes off his monitors. "Picture the van as your brain, with all the neural nets spreading out from it. The agents out there—they're my feet . . . my fingers"

"So you're telling me Peter is like your big toe? Does he know that?"

"I may not have used those exact words to him, but it's an apt comparison. Or, if you'd prefer, you could think of me as the captain of a starship residing in my captain's chair on deck, sending out my space probes."

"I can see you on a starship, though you're more of a Scotty than a Kirk."

"Now that's a high compliment. I do feel that my monitors and equipment are like my wee bairns," Travis said with a laugh, adopting a Scottish accent on top of his slight Texas drawl.

"You're not my picture of a Texan, that's for sure. No way can I see you as a bang-em-up, shoot-em-up cowboy."

"You, my friend, have a distorted view of Texans. I'm from Austin. It's more like a college town. Parts of Austin are not so different from the Village in Manhattan."

Their conversation was cut short by Peter calling in with an update from the apartment. When Neal heard the news, he said to Travis, "You keep monitoring. I'll be your right foot."

"Hadn't you better check with—"

Neal had grabbed an earpiece and darted outside before Travis could finish his sentence.

Neal raced to the outside of the tenement and scanned the perimeter. Stepping out on the street to get a view of the roof, he caught a glimpse of someone on the roof's northeast corner. The figure was dressed in black with a ninja-styled hood. As Neal ran to the side of the building, ninja-dude jumped to the roof of the adjacent building.

Neal called in through his watch-communicator, "Suspect on roof immediately east. In pursuit," and took off after him.

Leaping to the fire escape, he then scaled it to the roof, where he found his quarry on the opposite side. Ninja-dude didn't appear to have seen him and Neal ducked behind a water tower. Darting from one hiding place to another, he stealthily made his way closer and was able to snap a photo just before ninja-dude jumped to the next roof. Whispering his progress to the others, Neal leapt
after him, arriving in time to see him start to climb down the fire escape. Neal raced to the edge of
the building and peered over to see ninja-dude scrambling down the bottom rung of the ladder. A
car had stopped at the curb, apparently waiting for him. He couldn't make out the car's license plate
from the roof but if he climbed down quickly enough he might have a chance.

Neal swung onto the fire escape and started down in hot pursuit when it all came crashing to a halt.

A wave of dizziness threw his senses into a tailspin. Clutching the top rung of the ladder, his vision
blurring, it was as if he'd been flung into a whirlwind of dense smoke. Looking down, he was
horrified to see Klaus on the ladder below him. On the ground police were shooting up at him.
Bullets whizzed past, their acrid smoke stinging his eyes. Klaus was screaming at Neal for help,
but he was paralyzed, unable to utter a sound, unable to stop them. Neal felt himself being dragged
downward as Klaus's pleas echoed in his head.

"Neal, what's going on? What's your status? Neal, report, damn it!" Peter's voice in his earpiece
pierced through the blackness threatening to engulf him.

Clinging to the ladder, Neal fought to slow down his breathing. Would his words even be
coherent? He felt lightheaded and uncoordinated. Peter kept demanding answers, his voice loud
and harsh.

"Suspect climbed down the fire escape on the east side," Neal finally muttered. "Got in a waiting
car and sped off."

"Where are you now?"

"Starting to come down." At least he hoped so. His heart was still pounding out of his chest, but
this time when he ventured a look below, Klaus wasn't on the ladder. Neal could see members of
the team racing over to the side of the building. Raking a hand through his hair and taking a ragged
breath, he started to slowly descend. By the time he made it to the ground he'd pulled himself
together. No one should be aware that there was anything wrong. That he'd nearly screwed up.

Peter was waiting for him at the foot of the fire escape. He was not looking pleased.

Diana came running up to them, "Could you tell the make of the car, Neal?"

"Black Honda Civic," Neal said, keeping his answers short till he was sure he could trust his voice.
"Late model, maybe 2003. Couldn't get a license number."

"How about the suspect?" Jones asked.

"Had a ninja-style costume on. Got a photo." Neal pulled out his phone, and the others gathered
around to look at it.

"Whoa—that's a mean-looking dude," remarked Jones. "Looks like someone out of a video game.
Did you see a gun?"

Shaking his head, Neal said, "No. He could have stashed it in his costume."

"Diana, Jones, you head back," Peter said. "Check in with Travis and have him put out a BOLO.
NYPD should be here any minute." As Neal started to head back with them, Peter stopped him.
"Neal, a word first," and motioned him to one side.

There were still dark thunderclouds on Peter's face and Neal braced himself for the storm.
Peter spoke slowly and deliberately. "Didn't I give you orders to stay in the van and assist Travis in monitoring communications?"

"That's what I was doing," Neal protested. "But when I heard that the suspect could still be around, I thought you would want me to at least scan the area."

"And did you think I would want you to pursue an armed suspect on your own, unarmed, with no agent accompanying you?"

"I wasn't chasing him to catch him, only to get a photo and pinpoint his location."

"And what would have happened, if the suspect saw you chasing him and decided to shoot you? How would you have handled that?"

"Ducked?"

Peter rubbed the side of his head in exasperation. "You're not an agent. You're a consultant and that makes a big difference in how you handle a situation like this. You're not trained to pursue a suspect, particularly one implicated in a violent crime. Your wits aren't a shield against bullets."

"But I was able to obtain evidence that otherwise we wouldn't have gotten." Neal huffed in frustration. "Wasn't that worth it?"

"Worth what? Risking your life? No, I don't think so."

"If I'd been packing, would that have made a difference?"

"Maybe I should start carrying a gun. After all, that's what I'm supposed to do—take down the bad guys. And yeah, they shoot and sometimes people die. But that's what I signed up for. It's time I admitted it. Otherwise, I'm a liability to the team. What's the point?" Neal took a breath, unable to keep his emotions in check.

"Got it." Neal didn't say anything as they walked back to the apartment. He knew he had done the right thing—why didn't Peter understand? What happened on the roof—that was a moment of clarity. It was time to stop conning himself. This is who he was. Accept it. No more straddling the fence. No more—

Wait, what was he doing? He'd barely gotten Peter to agree letting him back in the field and already he was blowing it. Peter was going to zip tie him to his desk. He'd never be allowed back out. He'd—

"You coming up?"

Startled, Neal looked up and realized they had arrived back at the building. Peter was holding the door for him while, like an idiot, he continued to stand outside, staring at nothing. This had to stop. He was ruining everything.

"Sorry, I was thinking about what you said. You're right—I shouldn't have gone off on my own. I just wanted to contribute. I'm sorry . . . sorry I let you down." Trying not to melt under the intense
heat of Peter's eyes drilling into him, Neal walked on into the building and up the stairs.

**WCWCWCWCWCWCWC**

Peter shook his head in frustration at Neal's back as they climbed the stairs. This was his own fault. He knew Neal wasn't ready for field work, no matter what he was claiming. But damn it, was the kid trying to get himself killed? Flying off to chase the perp like that. What was he thinking? That was the problem—he wasn't thinking. What was going on with him? Neal didn't appear to know either. He looked wasted when he came down. Was that apology a con? If it was, it was a damned good one. His distress certainly appeared genuine. Was he actually serious about wanting to carry a gun? At this rate Peter was going to need a therapy session himself with Noelle.

In the apartment Tricia was supervising the collection of evidence. "Neal, I hear you got a photo of the suspect—good work." She appeared surprised when Neal's only reaction was a slight nod and he hurriedly pulled on latex gloves and began examining a bookcase for evidence.

Peter gave her a warning look and shook his head. "Anything surface about the sister?" he asked.

Diana walked into the apartment. "I talked with a neighbor. The sister's been gone for a couple of weeks, visiting relatives. The neighbor saw Thomas Slattery a few times starting last Friday she believes."

Outside, the wail of police sirens could be heard. The apartment was soon filled with NYPD officers supervising the removal of the body and securing the apartment. One of them was stationed at the apartment entrance to keep out the curious tenement occupants who were gathering in the hallway.

Jones came out of the bedroom, "Found a brochure on the Brooklyn Museum. That's the only item so far that has any connection to the robbery."

As the apartment continued to be scoured for evidence, Neal combed through the books in the bookcase. Examining one of them closer, he pulled out a brochure.

Peter walked over to him. "What'd you find?" he asked.

"Looks to be a brochure about N-Con," Neal said, surprised. "It was concealed within the book jacket." Neal scanned the pages. "I can't find anything written on it. It's hard to fathom why someone would go to the trouble of hiding it."

Peter called Jones over. "You're our N-Con expert. See anything?"

"Doesn't look like the brochure I have," Jones commented as he looked through it. "Hold on, this isn't a brochure for visitors. It's a guide for presenters, for people who are exhibiting at the convention. There are floor layouts and specs that you don't find in the brochure for the general public. But we've gone through the entire apartment and there aren't any gaming consoles. There's no computer. I'll go through the inventory, but I don't remember seeing anything remotely connected to gaming or computers. So what's this doing here?"

**WCWCWCWCWCWCWC**

It was late in the day by the time the work at the apartment was completed and the team had returned to the Federal Building.

"We'll make a fresh start on the evidence tomorrow," Peter said. "NYPD will handle the homicide, but we'll continue our investigation into the robbery."
As the agents packed up to leave, Peter considered how to handle the one remaining item on his list. Walking over to Neal's desk, he asked, "Got time to talk?"

"Would you mind waiting till tomorrow?" Neal asked. "I should leave for Columbia. I'm supposed to be meeting with my art professors this evening, going over my paintings. But if you want to go ahead, I understand. I'll call in and reschedule."

Neal looked worn out, and, to be frank, Peter felt the same way. Columbia was a convenient excuse for both of them. This was not a subject he wanted to have to deal with now either. Let emotions cool first. "All right, we'll meet tomorrow. Go . . . and try to get some rest."

Notes: Ninja-dude in all his glory is pinned to The Woman in Blue board of our Caffrey Conversation Pinterest site. Thanks to Penna Nomen for her beta wisdom and to you for reading! In the next chapter Neal explores options and Sara gives him a surprise call.

Blog: Penna Nomen & Silbrith Conversation: www.pennasilbrithconversation.blogspot.com
Chapter Visuals: The Woman in Blue board at the Caffrey Conversation Pinterest website: www.pinterest.com/caffreycon
Exploring Options


Neal wasn't conning Peter when he said he had to be at Columbia that evening. Granted, he may have overplayed the meeting with the professors. It was conceivable that one or two would come by and critique his work. But there was no denying the plain and simple truth that he wasn't ready to meet with Peter. What had gone down in Queens had been a disaster. He'd rather not blow it twice in one day.

The studio Columbia had assigned him at Watson Hall was proving to be much handier than he'd originally realized when he signed up for the master's program in Visual Arts. It had become a welcome refuge from everything else going on in his life, and he'd never needed it as much as now. As Neal walked to his studio from the subway stop, he tallied the damage from the past twenty-four hours.

Problem Number One: Mozzie. Although he knew about the Leopard, at least he wasn't aware of Neal's involvement, and Neal intended to keep it that way. Eventually Mozzie would wander off on some other tangent, and this wouldn't be an issue. But for the short term it would be prudent to keep him at a distance. Mozzie knew him so well, conning him would be a challenge. Besides, it left a bitter taste in Neal's mouth to deceive his old friend.

Problem Number Two: Peter. He still believed his instincts were right. If he hadn't gone after ninja-dude, they wouldn't have a clue what he looked like. And if he'd been packing, he wouldn't have done anything different. But if that's what Peter required before he'd allow Neal to do his job, so be it. He'd carry a gun but never use it.

Problem Number Three: Klaus. So much for his vaunted cat burglar skills. Can't even climb down a fire escape without freaking out. But after the trauma he'd put everyone through last spring dealing with his child abuse issues, the last thing he wanted now was for others to find out about him having flashbacks about Klaus. They'd write him off as a Section 8 and drum him out of the FBI for being psychologically unfit. No, he'd handle the Klaus mess on his own. After all, he wasn't a kid anymore. He could face up to his fears and not let some ghost wreck everything he was trying to achieve.

So where did that leave him? Problem Number One: plan made. Problem Number Two: day of reckoning tomorrow. Problem Number Three: in need of a solution. How exactly does one fight a ghost? It couldn't hurt to practice scaling down the outside of June's mansion rather than taking the stairs. That is, as long as the police didn't interfere. Nothing like throwing in a little Tuesday Tails practice into the mix, Neal thought with a grin. Operation damage control was well in hand.

When Neal arrived at Watson Hall, he stopped to check out the bulletin board. With the accumulation of a month's worth of notices since the start of the term, the board had assumed the appearance of an immense shaggy dog badly in need of grooming. Paper was overflowing everywhere—flyers tacked on top of other notices, political clubs, dance groups, LGBT meetings, athletic groups, roommate-wanted appeals, pizza coupons, the diversity was astounding. Somebody needed to recreate it as a collage sculpture for an exhibition if it hadn't been done already.

Neal had made a game of scrutinizing the board every time he went to his studio. Picking out the new flyers was good practice for pattern recognition. Today it was easy to pick out the new arrival since it had been tacked on with a small plastic sword. "Columbia Fencing Club"—he'd have to award them an extra point for originality. Neal had joined the Chelsea Fencing Club in lower
Manhattan over the summer. Under his Gary Rydell alias, he was known to be an expert and needed to keep up appearances. The club had proved to be a useful hangout for Gary. But once his classes had started, finding the time had been next to impossible. He hadn't thought about fencing at Columbia but it would be more convenient—no harm in writing down the contact information.

As he was writing, another student walked up and asked, "You fence?"

"I dabble," Neal said. "You?"

"Fenced as an undergrad. Joined the Columbia team last week. I'm Aidan, by the way."

"Neal. Are you in Visual Arts too?"

"Yeah, my studio's in Prentis Hall, north of the campus—way out in the boonies."

"I hear they have some facilities we don't have in Watson," Neal said trying to think of something positive to say. He'd felt lucky to be assigned a studio in Watson. Prentis was a converted milk-bottling plant at least a half-mile north of the campus in a no man's land of auto-repair shops and tenements in West Harlem.

"And I'm told the industrial warehouse vibe can be quite inspiring although it hasn't happened for me yet," Aidan said gloomily. "It reminds me of the mother ship of the Borg. It's fitting that the metal shop's there." Aidan paused and eyed Neal calculatingly. "We should fence sometime. We're the same height. Did you fence in college?"

"No, I may not present much of a challenge," Neal said innocently.

"Don't worry about that—we were all novices once," Aidan said magnanimously. "The gym at Columbia has an excellent training area. Most fencers practice at their own clubs I'm told, but this is where I've been working out. I've been having a tough time finding a partner though."

"Could be interesting. I work days so it'd have to be late."

"Me too. You feel like giving it a try tonight?"

Neal considered. No need to head back home. There'd be less chance of bumping into Mozzie. Aidan seemed likable. "Nine o'clock work for you?"

"Sure thing—see ya there."

As Neal walked into his studio, he couldn't help grinning. He hadn't hustled anyone in fencing in a long time, although this didn't really qualify. Besides, Neal had never fenced anyone on a college club. Aidan was the right build—he could be a formidable opponent.

Getting out his paints, Neal started on a new work. He'd made a preliminary study the night before and was eager to start on a large-scale interpretation. He already had the title in mind: *The Rock.*

A half-hour into painting, his cell phone rang. Frowning at the distraction, he glanced at the display with every intention of ignoring it, until he saw the source—Sara.

Much to his chagrin Neal had discovered that making connections with Sara was no easy feat. She'd tried to contact him several times unsuccessfully when he was working undercover on the Vermeer case. The next week he had been unable to reach her by phone and had resorted to email, only to discover that she'd gone to Amsterdam on business. She'd sent him a quick reply saying she'd try again when she was back.
To have her call now was the kind of interruption he welcomed. The last time he'd seen her was in the summer, when she was adjusting to her new job with Sterling-Bosch. When they'd first met, the wounds from Kate's departure were still fresh and he wasn't looking for another relationship. They'd seen each other occasionally as friends. But the more he got to know Sara, the more fascinated he was by her. Then just when he felt ready to take it to the next level, she was transferred to Boston on a training assignment. At the rate they were going, it'd be a year before they could even schedule a date.

"Hey, Sara. Back from Amsterdam?"

"Finally—you're a hard man to reach! Just back. The plane landed this afternoon. I'm on your home turf now. Sterling-Bosch scheduled meetings for me tomorrow at their New York office, so I'm taking the slow route home."

"Any chance we could meet up, maybe lunch?"

"Exactly what I was thinking. I have a two-hour gap midday."

"Lucky you. I could steal away for an hour or so."

"How about I meet you in lower Manhattan, near the Federal Building?"

"Do you like Thai? There's a new restaurant that opened in my neck of the woods—The Bangkok Inn—the food's authentic, and they don't rush you. It's on Thomas at Church St. We could meet at noon?"

"Sounds perfect—I like it spicy. We've a lot to catch up on."

"Your life as a jet-setter."

"Yours as a humble civil servant and student."

"Thanks for rubbing it in."

She gave a laugh. "It will be a nice change to go slumming with you."

Neal smiled to himself after hanging up. Sara liked it spicy… he could do spicy.

**WCWCWCWCWCWCWC**

Neal set off for the gym in high spirits. His critiques had gone well, better than he'd expected. He'd thought the professors would object to his idea for *The Rock*, but surprisingly they praised the concept and encouraged him to pursue it. So far, this evening was proceeding considerably better than the previous one.

This was Neal's first time to visit the gym and he discovered it to be a rabbit's warren of subterranean levels. The fencing area was tucked away in the back of one of the lowest levels. When Neal finally found it, Aidan was already there waiting for him.

After showing him where to pick up his equipment, Aidan asked, "Would you like to use foils? You said you haven't had time to practice."

"That's all right. Might as well make it more of a workout. Let's go with sabres," Neal said offhandedly.

"Sabres, huh?" Raising a brow, Aidan said, "Okay, you asked for it."
Blades in hand, they faced off on the fencing strip. *En garde!*

**WCWCWCWCWCWCWC**

Thirty minutes later, Neal and Aidan were collapsed on a bench laughing.

"I'm feeling snookered around now. Where did you learn to fence like that?" Aidan asked, wiping the sweat off his face with a towel. "I'm no slouch. I was captain of my team, but after the shellacking you just gave me, I feel like a tenderfoot,"

"Hey, you weren't bad yourself—you had me pulling out all the stops and then some," said Neal, still breathing heavily. "I cleverly quit while I was still ahead."

"Seriously, where did you fence?"

"I learned as a kid. The past few years I worked out in Europe with a French partner."

"Okay, d'Artagnan, you must, and I repeat, *must* be on Columbia's club team. We desperately need someone of your expertise."

"I don't think it'd work out with my schedule. I work for the FBI during the day and am going for a dual master's. There's no time to commit to regular practices."

"I hear you. I work as a programmer in the real world. But you won't need to practice. We could bring you in as our secret weapon."

"It's tempting, I'll grant you." Never in Neal's wildest dreams had he considered playing collegiate sports. Do you get a letter jacket for fencing? What would Peter say about that? "Where did you go to college?" he asked.

"MIT," Aidan said and added, "I know what you're going to say. How'd a geek like me wind up in Visual Arts? I started off in Computer Science, convinced I'd be the next Bill Gates, took a course on video art, and got hooked. But all those computer science courses weren't in vain. My programming job pays the bills so I don't have to be a starving artist."

"Actually I was going to ask how a geek like you wound up being able to fence so well."

"All that mouse practice, you know," Aidan said with a grin, "makes for supple wrists. Plus the logic used to write programs is not that different from calculating your moves in fencing."

Neal nodded in agreement. "I know what you're talking about. I feel the same way about chess. Looks like we have something in common."

"Looking forward to our partnership, d'Artagnan!"

**White Collar Division. October 14, 2004. Thursday morning.**

At 9 a.m. the next day, the team gathered in the conference room for the morning updates.

"I like the tie, Caffrey," Diana commented when Neal walked in and was rewarded with a brilliant smile.

Peter looked him over. One of those thin dental floss jobs. Still, he guessed the colors were pleasing. It looked expensive, even more so than usual. When was the last time someone mentioned his tie? It had to be when he wore the one Neal gave him for Father's Day. Neal seemed
in much better spirits today. He must have taken Peter's advice and gotten some rest.

When everyone had taken their seats, Peter got the briefing started. "Was there a match on any of the fingerprints?"

"The only prints that have been identified are those of Slattery and his sister," Tricia replied.

Diana added, "The forensics report confirms what we already knew—that Slattery was killed, execution style, one bullet to the forehead. Ballistics reports that the firearm was a .38 caliber pistol. Only one shot was fired. Whoever did it knew what he was doing."

"Slattery was killed a few minutes before we arrived," said Jones. "The examiner's office confirmed it. Nothing else of significance turned up during the autopsy."

"Since the door was locked when we arrived, either Slattery let the killer in and then locked the door behind him, or the killer locked the door afterwards," Tricia speculated. "There was no sign of forced entry, so it appears that Slattery opened the door willingly. But what must he have thought when he saw a ninja standing there? Surely he would have been alarmed, but we didn't find any signs of a struggle. Hard to believe he was expecting a ninja. It reminds me of the old Saturday Night Live sketch, where a Land Shark rings the door, calling out 'Candygram.'"

"It looks like Slattery was expecting this ninja-dude, as Neal calls him, as unlikely as it sounds," said Peter. "What do we have to link Slattery to the museum robbery? Only his fingerprints and a museum brochure?"

"That's about it," said Jones glumly. "Not much to go on."

"What about the presumed killer, our ninja-dude?" Turning to Neal, Peter said, "You were the only one who saw him. Describe again what happened."

"I spotted him on the roof of the tenement building. Just as I caught sight of him, he jumped to the roof of the building to the east. I scaled the fire escape and pursued him, hoping to get a better visual. I followed him and was able to photograph him. He jumped over to the next building to the east. I saw him getting into a car that was waiting for him—a black Honda Civic."

"This is the photo Neal got," and Peter displayed it on the projection screen.

"I thought I recognized it," Jones said. "Look at this," and he pulled up a second photo. "This is an artist's depiction of a gaming character. Notice any similarities?"

"It's the same character," said Diana. "There's no question."

"Exactly," confirmed Jones. "This is Sub-Zero, one of the main characters in Mortal Kombat."

"Oh, brother," Tricia said with a groan. "So now even the criminals are dressing like gaming characters. We'll all be forced to take up gaming."

"And I confirmed that the brochure Neal found was only sent out to N-Con presenters," added Jones.

"Has anyone found a connection between Slattery and gaming?" Peter demanded and was answered with a chorus of headshakes.

"Have there been any reports of anyone trying to fence Roman swords or coins?" Tricia asked.
"Not so far," Diana said. "Agents have checked pawn shops and found nothing."

Peter turned to Neal, "How about your contacts?"

"Sorry, nothing's surfaced."

"So, assuming we're correct in identifying Slattery as the thief," Peter summarized, "he either stole the artifacts to sell them on the black market, or he was commissioned by someone else to steal them. Since nothing was found in the apartment and no one on the street that we know of has heard of them, the likelihood that he was contracted to do the job becomes greater. If we assume for the moment that he was killed in connection with the robbery, what would be the motivation?"

"My vote goes for Slattery blackmailing whoever commissioned the theft," Jones said. "He was squeezing him for more money. It fits his M.O. Maybe he expected this Sub-Zero ninja-dude to make a payment and that's why he let him in. Ninja-dude could have been the one who ordered the robbery or he could be an agent for the buyer."

"Let's run with that," Peter challenged. "Do we have anything that might identify who's behind the robbery and now murder?"

"We have the N-Con brochure." At Jones's words, all eyes turned on him. "Now don't laugh, but I've been working on this theory. Ever since I saw the brochure, I wondered if there couldn't be some connection to N-Con, and then I thought about what had been stolen. Why did the thief not take the Hellenistic jewelry, but only the Roman sword and coins? Neal said the jewelry was even more valuable. Well, here's one possible reason. Suppose the man who ordered the robbery was a gamer?"

Raising a hand to ward off the chorus of groans and "not again's," he continued, "Here me out. If whoever had ordered the theft was a collector of Roman antiquities, Slattery would have taken the other items in the case, for instance those small ivory statues and Roman cameos. But if the buyer was a gamer, it's conceivable Slattery would have taken these specific items because of their gaming connection. There are gamers who are fanatics—and no Tricia, not including me—who collect antiques associated with the game they play."

"Supposing we buy into this idea of yours, what would be the most likely game connection to the sword and coins?" Peter asked.

"Ancient Rome is very popular with gamers. There are so many aspects of Roman civilization such as gladiator fights and epic battles that are ideal for gaming. Age of Empires has an extensive fan base. A new game, Rome: Total War just came out and is wildly popular."

"This makes sense, boss," Diana chimed in. "I can picture a gaming fanatic who is so obsessed by gaming that he would rob a museum for artifacts connected to his game. And disguising himself or his agent as a Mortal Kombat character fits the profile to a T."

"Jones, how would we identify this gaming fanatic?" Tricia asked. "Are there lists anywhere? Where would we begin?"

"No official records. Neither of the games I mentioned is played online, so you can't trace players by their IP addresses." He and Diana exchanged grins. "The best way I know of is at a gaming convention. Looks like we'll have to go to N-Con."

"Hold on a minute," Peter said. "Just how is N-Con going to help us?"

"All the best gamers will be there," Diana said. "It's a chance not only to test out new games and
hardware, but also for gamers to brag about their skills. There will be competitions, mock battles."

"That makes sense," Neal added. "Bragging rights are something I'm familiar with. Anyone who's acquired museum loot has to be egotistical enough that he won't be able to resist a stage like N-Con. It's even possible he would take along some of his loot. Probably not the sword itself since it's so fragile, but the scabbard is in excellent condition."

"Of course," Jones said. "It could be part of his costume."

"His what?" Peter asked, startled.

Diana said with a wicked smile, "Didn't we mention most everyone will be wearing costumes? N-Con is known worldwide for the elaborate costumes attendees wear of their favorite characters. Many are custom-made. The phenomenon is known as cosplay."

Peter rolled his eyes. "Oh, this just gets better and better. Any other ideas? Someone, anyone, please?" Looking around the table, all Peter got was shaking heads and silence. "I know I'm going to regret this, but let's assume for the moment we go along with this. Jones, you're the expert. I want you to spend this afternoon working up a plan of how the op would be conducted. Diana and Neal, check our sources and contacts again one more time for any leads on the stolen items. Tricia, you're in charge of researching the database to see if you can find any robberies connected with video games. We'll meet back at three o'clock."

As the agents left, Peter pulled Neal aside. "My office, 11 a.m., okay?"

"I'll be there," Neal promised.

WCWCWCWCWCWCWC

Promptly at eleven, Neal knocked on Peter's door.

"Take a seat," Peter said shortly as he finished editing a document.

Sliding into a chair, Neal picked up a pen and began spinning it in the fingers of one hand.

Peter closed his file and turned to Neal. "We need to talk about what happened yesterday."

"I know," said Neal. "About that—when I apologized, I meant it. It was certainly not my intention to be insubordinate or disrespectful."

"I appreciate that," Peter acknowledged, "but there's more going on. Are you feeling frustrated with your role at White Collar?"

Shaking his head, Neal said, "No… at least most of the time. But it's hard to feel like a full member of the team when I'm told I can't do something others can simply because I'm not armed. And, frankly, I don't see how having a gun would have helped me in what I was trying to accomplish. After all, I wasn't attempting to capture the guy, just ID him. I won't be very useful, if I have to wait around to be accompanied by an agent for everything I do. I can take care of myself. I've been in so many situations more dangerous than what happened yesterday."

Making a mental note to pursue that fascinating topic at a later time, Peter said, "In a team, everyone has his own skills. You have skills no one else brings to the table, but you also have to accept that you can't do everything on your own, without backup. The FBI doesn't work like that. I don't work like that."
"If it had been Diana or Jones, would you have had a problem?"

"No, but that's because they're trained in how to pursue a suspect. You're not. That makes a big difference in what you can and can't do." Peter paused and looked pointedly at him. "Yesterday you talked about carrying a gun. Do you still feel that way?"

"If I don't, will you allow me pursue a lead on my own or will you always feel I need protection? Because if that's the case, I don't see how it'll work unless I start carrying one."

Was Neal right? That was a question Peter had asked himself last night. Had he overreacted to Neal's actions? After all, he had managed to secure valuable evidence. He considered Neal part of his family now. Was that affecting his professional judgment? "You shouldn't feel compelled to carry a gun, but you have your certification. If ever you do want to start 'packing' as you call it, there's training you'd need to go through, but I could arrange it. What concerns me is that you're overreacting because of what happened with the Leopard, just like you did in Europe after you were blackmailed by Robert. Only back then you were out to prove you were a super-criminal. Now are you aiming to be another Dirty Harry? I gotta tell you when somebody who's repeatedly told me how much he hates guns suddenly wants to start packing, I can't help but wonder."

Neal stopped spinning the pen in his fingers, and put it down. After a moment, he said, "I don't think that's what's happening this time. It's a matter of being able to do my job, not trying to escape into another personality. Remember, this summer you were the one ordering me to carry a gun. I'm ready now to carry one full time. Isn't that what you want?"

"Not necessarily," Peter countered. "Last summer was a different situation."

"Really, how so?" Neal said, raising a brow.

"All right, here's the deal. If you still want to carry a gun in two weeks, we'll sit down and talk about training. In the meantime I'll try not to go overboard on the protective father act, and in return you go easy on the daredevil stuff. Give me a break, won't you? Having a spider monkey on my team is something I'm still getting used to."

"So you're not going to zip tie me to a desk?"

"If it'd work, I might be tempted. But you'd probably just shapeshift your way out of it."

Neal shot him a startled look, but quickly recovered. "In the interim—"

Peter held up a hand as his phone rang, "It's Hughes. Let me catch this." While he talked with Hughes he kept an eye on Neal, who was looking unusually reflective. What had he said? Shapeshifting wasn't slang for some insult, was it? Hanging up, Peter continued, "I need to see Hughes about the Sanderson case, but it shouldn't take long. Want to grab something to eat afterwards?"

Neal got up. "Thanks but I'm meeting a friend for lunch."

Peter hesitated. "Look, when I said shapeshift, I didn't mean anything by it."

Neal brushed it off. "Sorry, I got distracted by an idea for a painting."

"Who you meeting for lunch?"

"Sara Ellis."
This was a pleasant surprise. Peter hadn't realized Neal had started dating again. Maybe he was finally over Kate. "You two seeing each other?"

"I wish," Neal said with a frustrated shrug. "Maybe . . . if we're ever in the same town for long enough. This is just lunch."

Notes: Many thanks to Penna Nomen for being my co-conspirator and plot-spinner. There are some references to her story Caffrey Disclosure in this chapter: the tie that Neal gave Peter for Father's Day and the incident with the gun last summer, which occurs in a later chapter of Disclosure. In the next chapter Neal's lunch with Sara takes an unexpected direction and Peter is forced to acquire new skills.

If you're curious to see what Aidan looks like, he's pinned to the Woman in Blue board of our Caffrey Conversation Pinterest site. Some of you have asked me to update more frequently, so I'm going to give it a shot. I'll post the next chapter this coming Tuesday. As always, your feedback is much appreciated!

Blog: Penna Nomen & Silbrith Conversation: www.pennasilbrithconversation.blogspot.com
Chapter Visuals: The Woman in Blue board at the Caffrey Conversation Pinterest website: www.pinterest.com/caffreycon
Making Plans


Shapeshifter.

Peter had called him a shapeshifter. As Neal walked to lunch, he reflected on why that had bothered him. It wasn't that different from the way he'd described himself recently when he said he was like a square of origami paper. One of his art mentors had lectured his group on the need to reveal themselves in their art, to "expose their souls." How would one paint a shapeshifter? That merited further study, but at the moment Sara was a much more inviting prospect to consider.

The Bangkok Inn was only a short walk from the Federal Building, and Neal arrived ahead of time. Since it was so new, seats were hard to come by, especially at the peak of lunch hour. Fortunately Neal had made friends with one of the waitresses during a previous visit, and she'd reserved him a prized table in a side alcove. Unlike most Thai restaurants in the area, the Bangkok Inn had taken great care to provide an authentic atmosphere. Silk hangings in shades of cinnamon and umber along with Thai dance masks were hung on the rustic wood panel walls. Alcoves, set off by trapezoidal arches, lined both sides of the restaurant and provided a measure of privacy. Neal took a seat and ordered a pot of jasmine tea. The last time he'd seen Sara, they'd grabbed a bite to eat from a street cart vendor. This was a step up which she should appreciate.

Sara arrived promptly at noon, looking elegant in a slim turquoise silk dress. Her long burnished copper hair was swept casually back off her face. Standing up, Neal waved her over to the alcove.

"I'm glad we could finally make connections, stranger!" Taking her seat on the banquette and nodding her approval at the surroundings, Sara added, "Are you trying to impress me? If so, you succeeded."

"After all the difficulties we had in contacting each other, this seemed appropriate." Neal felt he was smiling too widely. Was that even possible?

"That did throw me for a loop when Peter returned my call a couple of weeks ago. Must have been one super-secretive op you were on. Anything you can tell me?"

"Undercover cloak-and-dagger stuff. You know me—a man of mystery." He poured her a cup of tea as a waitress brought over a plate of hors d'oeuvres.

"It wouldn't have anything to do with the attempted theft of the Vermeer?" she asked, her eyes alight with curiosity.

Impressive. How had she heard about that? Neal kept it casual and low-key. "For whoever managed to prevent that, it would have been quite a coup." Changing the subject, he asked, "What about you? Is Sterling-Bosch providing adequate thrills for your adventure-loving self?"

"More than enough," Sara said happily. "With its global network, I feel like the world is my home base now. I've left my training days behind and am on my first permanent assignment. Mainly I work in insurance recovery and insurance fraud investigation, tracking down stolen items."

"So not too different from what I do."

"I suppose, but mine's much more glamorous," she said with a smile that lessened the sting.
"I wouldn't say that," Neal riposted. "Basically you're just a high-class repo man."

"Make that white collar bounty hunter," Sara said with a confident toss of her hair as she nibbled on a spring roll.

"Do you prefer a shotgun or semiautomatic?"

"Actually, I carry a mean baton. Better not get on my bad side. Bryan says I'm a natural."

"Who's Bryan?"

"Bryan McKenzie. He's the senior agent who was assigned to mentor me. Bryan has been letting me accompany him on several of his cases. He has such a gift for investigation, I feel incredibly lucky to be working for him. At first I wasn't able to spend much time with him—he was always off to one exotic location after another—but now he's taking me along on cases."

"Really? How cozy for you." Yes, do tell me about Bryan, Neal thought with a sigh.

Sara seemed to have totally missed his sarcasm and proceeded nonstop to describe her recent cases, naturally, all with the fabulous Bryan. Barely pausing to order, she waxed euphoric about the recovery of a stolen Ferrari in Monaco. "To celebrate, he took me to a glamorous, 5-star restaurant with a glorious view of the harbor. Have you ever been to Monte Carlo, Neal?"

"Yes, actually, I was—"

"Then you know what I'm talking about. Bryan took me shopping the next day. We started off at Yves Saint Laurent on the Avenue des Beaux-Arts and finished at Escada. I could have stayed there a week, but we had to dash off to Brussels to meet with Interpol."

Bryan. Neal was already hating that name. As he smiled at Sara, his thoughts wandered off. Lyin' Bryan? No, Sighin' Bryan. That was it. If he didn't get her to stop sighin' over Bryan, he wouldn't stand a chance. Sara reminded him of something Chantal had once told him about her early life with Klaus. She couldn't resist the lure of the international high life that Klaus offered. Sara appeared to be equally enthralled.

Breaking in, he said, "Were you able to visit Kyoto when you were in Japan? That's one of my favorite cities."

"No, unfortunately, but we did manage a side trip to Mt. Fuji. Bryan had studied martial arts there and wanted to pay his respects to his master, or sensei as he called him. Anyway that was our plan. But his sensei insisted on Bryan leading a class in tai chi."

How was he going to compete with Sighin' Bryan? All his own international traveling had been when he was a criminal, something Sara didn't know anything about. And his most exciting cases with the FBI were classified. Mortgage fraud was definitely not going to cut it.

**White Collar Division. October 14, 2004. Thursday mid-afternoon.**

It was almost time for the afternoon briefing to begin. Peter put aside his paperwork, picked up his mug and headed to the coffee bar for a refill before starting what could be a long session. This was the first time he'd let Jones plan an operation, but if there was ever a situation tailor-made for his expertise, this had to be it. It would be a good test of his management skills.

On his way back, he overheard Neal on the phone.

Peter approached him. "That Mozzie on the phone?"

Nodding in confirmation Neal replied, "Nothing's been found, and there's no chatter about anyone wanting to buy Roman antiquities."

"You and Mozzie okay?"

"Yeah, basically. Time for the meeting? I'll grab a coffee too." Neal ducked off to the coffee bar.

Mozzie must have gotten on his nerves. That was understandable. Peter had found that for himself Mozzie was one nutcase best tolerated in small doses.

During the meeting it quickly became apparent that N-Con was their only option. No names had surfaced during the database search, and all the other avenues had been exhausted as well. Turning to Jones, Peter said, "Take it away, Jones. What do you propose?"

Jones projected a diagram on the screen. "This is the layout of the Javits Center on West 34th where the convention takes place. The scale of the event is massive. Over a hundred thousand square feet of show floor. Exhibit halls, gaming areas, tournaments. Fortunately we can focus on the Roman games or it would take an army of agents to cover it all. The show runs three days, Saturday through Monday. So if we don't have any luck the first day we'll have other opportunities."

"You mean we'll have to endure this for three days?" Tricia groaned.

"Cheer up," said Neal. "Beats three days of sitting in the van in my book."

"Amen to that, brother," Jones muttered back.

"I heard that," said Peter. "All right what is your plan of attack to get this done as speedily as possible?"

"I devised what I call the trident maneuver. Peter, you and Tricia will talk with the exhibitors of Roman games to gain leads on anyone matching our profile. Diana and I will work the gamers themselves. And Neal, you'll question the vendors."

"How many Roman games are going to be shown?" asked Peter.

"Glad you asked, Boss," Diana stood up and passed around sheets of paper. "Here's the list. There are over twenty-five games that are set in Ancient Rome, but by far the most popular are Age of Empires and Rome: Total War. Since Rome: Total War has just been released, it will attract the most attention and should be our best source of information. We also thought that would be the best game for you and Tricia to concentrate on. Very few have played it yet, so your ignorance will be understandable."

"How about adding something as bait?" Neal asked. "I could forge a few Roman coins and try to find a seller."

Tricia shot him a quick glance. "Do you have time?"

"It shouldn't take very long. Making the molds won't be complicated and Columbia has a metal
"Tricia, you may not realize," said Peter, "that Neal is a skilled metallurgist." Holding up his hand to Jones's guffaw, he added, "I know it's hard to swallow, but one of his entrance exams for Columbia was in metallurgy, and I have it on good authority he scored high marks on it."

"Sweet!" said Diana as Neal shrugged and tried to look nonchalant.

"Just remember, Neal," Peter added, "the FBI has no budget for gold bullion. You'll have to make do with a lesser metal."

"I've managed before. You'll like the results."

Jones ticked off a line on his list. "That leaves only one item left—our gear." Neal surveyed the room. This was sounding promising. Diana was already looking smug. "As in costumes," Jones elaborated.

"Now, hold on," Peter protested. "I'm inclined to agree to a trip to N-Con, but I haven't signed off on any costumes."

"Killjoy," muttered Neal and was promptly rewarded with the expected scowl.

"But, Boss, it will be so much easier to be accepted as a gamer and an insider if we're attired correctly," explained Diana. Her logic was inescapable. Surely Peter would see that.

"I agree," Tricia said, unexpectedly supporting her. "The proper wardrobe is essential to the successful op. I believe that may be a direct quote from the operations manual."

Peter narrowed his eyes at her suspiciously. "You sure you're not making that up? I sense a conspiracy around here."

"But there is a problem," noted Diana. "The costume rental companies are already going to be tapped out. We're really doing this at the last minute. I'm afraid we'll be stuck with the dregs."

"Not necessarily," countered Neal, ever the helpful teammate. "I think we could persuade Elizabeth to help us on such an essential aspect of the op, couldn't we, Peter? El has contacts through the community theater where she performs. I bet Janet would help. She's a wardrobe supervisor. I've seen some of her work, and she's brilliant. The way she transformed Peter—"

"No need to go into details, Caffrey," interrupted Peter hastily with a warning glare as several sets of eyes had gone wide-eyed in anticipation. "I'll ask El, but you should be prepared. This is too short of notice. I'm sure nothing can be arranged and we'll have to do without."

"Don't go all negative on us, Peter," Tricia admonished. "What kind of costumes will we need?"

"Roman generals would be ideal, Spartan warriors, gladiators, Amazon women..." Jones turned to Diana and raised his eyebrows a couple of times.

"How about a Viking?" Peter asked, "I could go along with that. I like Vikings. It must be the hats with horns..."

"Pillage and plunder, I can see it. I knew there was a thief hidden under that lawman exterior," Neal said with satisfaction.

"This is Ancient Rome we're dealing with, not Viking raids," lectured Jones.
Tricia quickly broke in. "So, Jones, what's our next step?"

"Tricia, you prepare our surveillance equipment and maps of the facility. Neal will work on the coins. Peter, you're in charge of costume arrangements. Make it work," he added with a grin. "Diana and I will take care of the preparations for tomorrow. Beginning at 8 a.m. sharp she and I will run Gamers Boot Camp for the rest of you."

"Boot Camp?" Neal liked the way Jones planned an op. He needed to plan all their ops in the future. He'd make that suggestion to Peter at the first opportunity. "You'll want to consult with Peter on that. He's an expert. Hope everyone likes pizza."

"Did I miss something, Caffrey?" Diana asked.

"When I was cramming for my entrance exams to Columbia, Peter saved my sanity by hauling me off to Burke Boot Camp. Wouldn't have passed without it, and him. A word of advice, though. Don't let him make breakfast."

**WCWCWCWCWCWCWC**

Once he'd returned to his office, Peter called El.

"Hi, Peter, this is a pleasant surprise."

"Glad I caught you, hon. I need your help on a case."

"Oh, really? What gives?"

"That Brooklyn Museum robbery I was telling you about? It looks like our best opportunity to find who's behind it will be at the gaming convention going on this weekend, N-Con. Have you heard of it?"

"Of course. At my rehearsal last week everyone was talking about. I didn't realize so many of the players were also gamers."

"I'm told that for quote the success of the operation unquote we need to be in costumes. The standard costume outlets are probably already sold out. Neal volunteered Janet as a resource. I'm sure she's much too busy to help, but just as a formality I—"

"What a great idea! Janet will love helping, especially when I explain it's a matter of national security."

"Please don't!"

El continued, ignoring his protest, "There will be one stipulation, and that is I insist on being present for wardrobe selection and fitting. I'll try to set it up for tomorrow afternoon. Will that work with your timing?"

"Yes, we should be available in the afternoon. We're planning to attend N-Con on Saturday and Sunday too if needed."

"I wish I could come along. This sounds like so much fun."

*Maybe for you,* Peter thought as he hung up. Hadn't he been talking about returning to business as usual? How'd all this happen?

Heading down to the coffee bar for a refill, he saw Neal at the copier.
"I thought you would've already left."

"Just about to. I'm making copies of the coin photos."

"Will you ask Mozzie to help?"

"No, I got it. I'll make the molds and be able to cast the coins myself. You talk with Elizabeth?"

"Yes, and unfortunately she thinks Janet will be excited to help."

"Excellent. I may wind up with another photo for my collection."

"No cameras allowed! I plan to confiscate all phones and cameras before we arrive. How was your lunch with Sara, by the way?"

"Good. She told me about her job at Sterling-Bosch."

"Where's she living these days?"

"She's currently in Boston."

"Too bad. I like Sara. You won't have many opportunities to see her."

Neal shrugged. "Just as well. She's head over heels with her new job and the international scene. I make a boring comparison."

"I find it hard to believe that anyone would think Neal Caffrey is boring."

"Have her tell you about Sighin' Bryan sometime."

"Sighin' Bryan?"

"Her mentor at Sterling-Bosch. It's Bryan this, Bryan that. Bryan wound up being the main course at lunch. Not exactly what I'd planned."

**Prentis Hall, Columbia University. October 14, 2004. Thursday evening.**

Aidan wasn't joking about the building his studio was in. This was Neal's first time to Prentis Hall, and it felt like he'd entered the land of industrial grunge. As he walked down a corridor looking for the metal shop, he was struck by the elaborate graffiti on the walls. Exposed pipes ran everywhere on the walls and ceilings. Add to that a banshee-like wailing coming out of a stairwell, and he half-expected to see the Borg Queen of the Collective herself come floating down.

"Hey, d'Artagnan, you lost?"

Neal turned around to see Aidan coming up. "This place is unreal. It's like the movie set for a post-apocalyptic sci-fi flick. What are those eldritch screeches coming from the stairwell?"

"Those? I barely notice them now. That's the Computer Music Center. The upper floors house not only the center but also studios. Seems like there's always someone experimenting. I'm taking a course on the psychological aspects of sound and we wind up creating some very freaky stuff. I work primarily in video and plan to make use of the techniques. I can show you around if you like."

"I'll take you up on that tour later, but right now I'm on a mission to make Roman coins. Could you point me to the metal shop?"
"Roman coins? I'd love to hear the story behind that. In exchange I'll happily be your guide along the River Styx. You can give me a coin later."

**White Collar Division. October 15, 2004. Friday morning.**

When Peter arrived at eight o'clock, it was clear Diana and Jones had come in much earlier. They'd already taken over the largest of the conference rooms and transformed it into a gamer's paradise. Peter couldn't believe the accumulation of gear they'd amassed. PCs and game consoles covered the table. Guide books as well as various joysticks and other peripherals he couldn't identify were scattered about.

"Is all this stuff yours?" he asked Jones in disbelief.

"Nah, I borrowed some of it from friends, and Diana did some scrounging too."

Neal was already sitting at the table pouring over a player's guide.

Jones said, "Now that everyone's here, this is how we'll work it. Diana's in charge of game consoles. She'll give you grunts lessons in Xbox and PlayStation2. I'll instruct you in the fine art of PC gaming. *Age of Empires: The Rise of Rome* and *Rome: Total War* are already loaded on the PCs, and *Rome: Total War* is also on the consoles."

Diana broke in, "And just so you can walk the walk and talk the talk, I've got *Halo* loaded on Xbox and *Mortal Kombat* on the PS2s. You're going to have your work cut out for you."

"Diana and I will demo each game at the beginning, and then you'll spend the rest of the morning refining your technique—hey, no groans, Burke. I heard that. While you work on that, Diana and I will prepare the assignments for Saturday. We'll wrap it up over lunch with post-game analysis and strategizing. And, yes, prizes may be awarded at the total discretion of the judging panel—that means Diana and me."

Neal raised his hand and waved it frantically.

Diana took it. "Yes, Caffrey, you can win multiple prizes, and no, I'm not saying what they are up front."

By the time Special Agent in Charge Reese Hughes showed up at nine o'clock, the sounds of exploding grenades and ancient battles were reverberating throughout the upper level. He walked into the conference room and was completely ignored by his agents. Neal was gazing with fixed attention at battle formations on a PC, Tricia was muttering to herself while reading a gaming guide and making notes. Peter was cursing at his Xbox controller while being slaughtered by the Halo Covenant.

Jones walked up to Hughes. "Like to join in, sir?"

"Tell me this is job related, Jones."

"Yes, sir, one hundred percent."

"Official FBI business?"

"Preparation to catch the person responsible for the Brooklyn Museum robbery."

"Then carry on. Keep the bloodshed to a minimum."
"Will do, sir."

**WCWCWCWCWCWCW**

Promptly at noon, Jones called a halt to the warfare. "Put down your joysticks. Pizza's arrived. We should be serving beer, but will have to make do with sodas."

Peter leaned back in his chair, massaging his thumbs. "Call a medic. My thumbs feel like they're about to fall off."

"You and me, too," groaned Tricia. "I have blisters on both hands."

"No pain, no gain," said Diana, not showing a trace of remorse. "Everyone feeling up to tackling N-Con tomorrow?"

"What's the game plan?" Neal asked as he reached for a slice of pizza.

"Doors open at ten o'clock," Jones said. "We'll have a surveillance van parked outside for our command center, which Travis and Collins will operate. We should arrive separately. I'm going to work the PC area; Diana will handle the console freplay section. You others will be in the exhibit hall. Neal, how'd it go with the coins last night?"

"Not bad," Neal said as he placed four golden coins on the table. "Behold, two of these aurei were issued by the Emperor Diocletian and two by Emperor Nero."

The others picked up the coins. "Outstanding!" Jones exclaimed as he examined a Nero aureus. "Any chance I could have one afterwards?"

"Sure. I made extras. I figured everyone would like one, but in return I want first pick on costume."

"Deal," Diana promptly affirmed. "Speaking of costumes, Peter what do you have to report?"

"Unfortunately," replied Peter, slapping on a crestfallen expression, "El had . . . no difficulty—you can stop cheering now—in convincing Janet to help. She and El are expecting us at two o'clock at Janet's wardrobe warehouse in the Garment District on West 36th Street."

"That puts the last piece in place," said Jones with satisfaction. "I believe our best chance to identify whoever's behind this will be by finding the scabbard. Assuming I'm right, he or she will want to show it off by wearing it." Jones displayed a photo on the screen. "Neal, give us the description again."

"The sheath is of tinned and gilded bronze, 23 inches long by 3 inches wide. The decoration portrays Tiberius presenting Augustus with a statuette of Victory. Augustus is semi-nude and flanked by Roman gods. If there's a sword in the scabbard, it won't be the genuine one. The actual sword is so heavily corroded that it's far too fragile to be worn."

"But we shouldn't assume our suspect will be wearing it," Peter noted. "We'll need to sniff out as many likely candidates—Roman game fanatics or collectors—as possible."

"And I'll use the coins to chat up the vendors about gamers in the market for artifacts," added Neal.

"I have prepared maps of the convention layout at the Javits Center," said Jones, "and marked the main areas for us to focus our efforts. In addition to the expo and gaming halls, separate rooms are set aside for vendors and tournaments. Those also need to be investigated."
"What's this round area?" Tricia asked. "I think it's labeled Arena of Champions."

"That's set aside for a mock gladiator combat show that will be held at the conclusion of the convention on Monday evening. The venue is very dramatic with a ceiling that goes up through four levels. It should be a spectacular event. There may be some practicing going on when we're there, but I think we can safely ignore that section."

"Aren't we forgetting something?" Neal asked.

"What's that, Caffrey?" said Diana, putting down her slice of pizza.

"I believe someone mentioned prizes for today's events?"

"Oh, right. Wouldn't want to forget that, would we?" Diana reached into a bag. "After prolonged and weighty deliberation, the decision of the judges, not subject to review, is as follows: First prize for most progress exhibited by an individual goes to Tricia Wiese." Diana handed her a copy of *Pirates of the Caribbean*. "Your boys should enjoy this," she added. "Kid-friendly and low gore index."

Tricia stood up and took a bow. "Thanks, guys. My kids are going to be so proud."

Jones continued, "Our second award goes for most creative strategy and is won by our own Special Agent Peter Burke for his use of catapults and armored elephants in *Age of Empires: Rise of Rome*. Your award is a copy of *Age of Empires II: Age of Kings* where you'll be able to play a Viking and pillage and plunder to your heart's content.

Peter received his game to the claps and cheers of his team.

"And that just about wraps up Gamers Boot Camp," Jones said. "Let's finish our pizza and head—"

"Hold on a second," interrupted Diana. "Didn't you forget something?"

"Don't think so," said Jones, shaking his head.

"Oh, I believe there's one more prize to be awarded," Diana said wickedly. "Caffrey, take a bow. For annihilating Jones's army in *Rome: Total War*, your own personal copy along with the title of SBK, Supreme Butt-Kicker. This title will self-destruct in eight hours so enjoy it while it lasts."

Peter nudged Neal. "Your own title! You've made it to the majors, kid."

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**Notes:** In the next chapter, Peter's destiny awaits him at the wardrobe warehouse, where his dream of being a Viking will have to remain unfulfilled for a while longer. Then it's off to N-Con.

Many thanks to Penna Nomen for helping me navigate the treacherous waters of Neal's dating life. Neal's adventures in Burke Boot Camp when he was preparing for the Columbia entrance exams are related in my first story, *Complications.*
The Trident Maneuver

New York Garment District. October 15, 2004, Friday, 2:00 p.m.

The address Elizabeth had provided Peter was for a large theatrical supply warehouse in the Garment District. The warehouse took up most of the block, with costumes on the sixth floor. Peter had never met Janet, but based solely on her help during the last case, felt she must have a demonic sense of humor. He was not looking forward to what would take place during this afternoon's foray. Personally he'd much rather have gone after a small arms dealer than be faced with an afternoon of costume-fitting.

The others didn't appear to share his sense of foreboding. On the drive over, Tricia and Diana had spent the entire time discussing the finer points of wrist gauntlets and goddess sandals. Jones and Neal were arguing over helmets and leg guards. White Collar, it was obvious, was never going to be the same.

When they got off the elevator, El was waiting for them. "How was boot camp?"

"The grunts all turned in kickass performances," Diana replied. "Your husband won a prize."

"Oh, really?" El said with a laugh.

"We all did," explained Peter.

"Is that so?" said El, looking quizzically at Jones.

"We took pity on them," he admitted. "What they lacked in skill, they made up for with determination. Never had a harder working bunch of grunts."

A woman came out from the back to greet them and El made the introductions.

Janet Dodson was a tiny woman with short, black spiky hair and immense turquoise frame glasses. She was simply clad in an oversized sweater and black stretch pants. A cloth tape measure was hung around her neck along with a small pair of scissors on a chain. "I'm delighted to be able to help the FBI again," she said with a knowing nod to Peter. "Elizabeth gave me the general outline of what you're planning. I gather you want to be outfitted for Roman cosplay?"

"You got it," said Diana. "Jones and I thought it would be best to go as named characters rather than generic types." Turning to Peter, she said, "Boss, you've been cast as Julius Caesar."

Neal immediately smacked his hand on his chest and saluted. "Hail, Caesar!" he boomed, stifling his laughter while the others didn't bother showing any restraint.

"Very appropriate," Peter said and couldn't resist adding, "Just remember, you plebes have to follow my commands at all times."

"Caffrey, it seemed only fitting that you should be Mark Antony," Diana said, "and Jones will be going as Scipio."

Nodding with satisfaction, Jones said, "One of the greatest commanders in military history, victor in the Second Punic War, vanquisher of Hannibal, I'll rock it."

"What about you and Tricia?" Peter asked. "If we have to go through with this masquerade, I hope..."
you've thought of something suitable for yourselves."

"Amazon warriors, of course," replied Tricia. "I shall be Hippolyta, Queen of the Amazons, and Diana—"

Neal broke in, "Oh no, we absolutely have to cast a Cleopatra, and I in my august role of SBK select Diana for the part."

"Caffrey, what makes you think I would possibly go along with—"

"You said I could have first pick," Neal rebuffed, "and as I recall you didn't say it had to be a costume for myself."

"Cleopatra is an outstanding choice for Diana," Janet confirmed as Neal nodded smugly. "You won't even need to wear a wig. I don't foresee any difficulty in achieving any of your desired looks. I've already set up dressing areas with a wide choice of costumes. Are you ready to go Roman?"

Janet led them down a corridor to the fitting rooms. The room for Tricia and Diana was next to the one for the men. Saying she'd be back in thirty minutes for critiques and adjustments, she left them to make their selections. Elizabeth joined Tricia and Diana for their fittings.

Peter surveyed their room. One wall was solid mirrors. Several garment racks had been rolled in which contained a bewildering assortment of tunics, capes, and breastplates. Spread out on a large work table were helmets, belts, arm gauntlets, and leg guards. A selection of shields, swords, and Roman sandals lined a wall. Janet had really outdone herself, he acknowledged with a smile. And, looking on the bright side, he could count this as the FBI's mandated team-building exercise for the year. He'd probably wind up with a commendation for creativity.

As the men experimented with different looks, they could hear giggles coming from the other room. "There better not be any hidden cameras in here," Peter grumbled.

"Mighty Caesar has nothing to fear," scoffed Neal as he spun around, striking a pose. "You catching this?" he called out to the ceiling and then added, "Peter, you should try on these arm gauntlets. They'd be perfect with the breastplate you're wearing."

"Oh no, you don't. No arm gear for me. Just the basics. That'll be plenty." Surely the tunic, sandals and helmet were enough to pass muster. He'd let Jones and Neal go crazy with the froufrou stuff, but not him.

They had already finished selecting their outfits while Peter was still rummaging through the tunics as he tried to find a longer one. "These must have all been designed for much shorter men," he complained. "After all, Julius Caesar needs to maintain his dignity."

"Here, try these leg guards," suggested Jones and added with a grin, "You won't feel so exposed."

In the end, even Peter was pleased. His leather tunic hid his gun very effectively. Jones looked impressively threatening so as to make any criminal cower. As for Neal, Peter had steered him to a less warlike look with minimal armor. If he'd been able to select a character for Neal, he would have cast him as a poet—maybe Horace—someone less bellicose, a reminder to keep out of harm's way. He could just imagine Neal's reaction, though, if he'd suggested carrying a lyre rather than a sword.

Neal, startled, shot him a look. "What's so funny?"

"Nothing," said Peter hastily. "Private joke, are we done here?"
"Janet should be coming by shortly," said Jones. "She has to sign off on our transformation."

Jones picked up a sword and started practicing lunges with it. "Am I doing it right?" he asked Neal.

"You want to grip it like this, with your thumb on the side." Neal picked up a sword and demonstrated, then started to swing the sword in graceful arcs.

*Where had Neal learned to handle a sword?* Peter was about to ask him when the woman of the hour appeared. Scrutinizing their looks, Janet tweaked them all. Apparently not to the surprise of the others, she spent the most time on Peter. "You're really not into accessorizing, are you?" she noted. Neal and Jones, exchanging looks, choked back their laughter while she added arm gauntlets and a collar.

"Is a cape really necessary?" Peter pleaded.

"Julius Caesar wouldn't appear in public without one," noted Neal earnestly.

Janet stepped back and nodded with satisfaction. "Ready to meet the ladies?"

They followed her to the reception area where El, Tricia, and Diana greeted them with not a few whistles and claps. Tricia in a leather bustier and short leather skirt, with a cape, Roman sandals, and waving a sword was a sight Peter would not soon forget. As for Diana … Peter couldn't decide if it were more entertaining to watch her or Neal's reaction. She was a vision in a gold and black skin-tight tunic, showing significantly more cleavage than Peter had ever seen her display. She had a slinky gold pleated skirt slit high up her legs, snake armbands, headpiece, and even snake sandals. Neal walked up to her. "You do know how incredibly hot you look, right?"

"Careful, Caffrey, I have more than these snakes to defend myself."

Elizabeth broke in, "All of you look fantastic. Janet, you're a miracle worker."

"Before you leave to change," Janet said, "there is one last item that is non-negotiable—portraits. Everyone, strike a pose."

Janet wasn't satisfied with one group portrait. She insisted on individual and group shots, both of the women together and men together. Peter didn't think it would ever end, although he had to admit the one with Neal lying on the ground and Diana triumphantly preparing to club him wasn't bad. He might need a copy of that.

It took thirty more minutes before Peter was able to marshal the troops to go back to work. He and Neal waited in the reception area for the others who were taking forever to pack their clothes. El joined them after a few moments. "Would you like to come over for dinner tonight, Neal? It's been a while. Satchmo's missed seeing you."

"Thanks, Elizabeth, but I'm going to a concert tonight with a friend."

"Anyone I know?"

"No, but Peter does."

"I do? Who's that?"

"You remember Fiona from the baroque painting seminar? We're going to a Clannad concert on campus tonight."
"Clannad? Is that a rock group?" he asked.

"They're an Irish band," Elizabeth explained. "Very popular. They combine Celtic, new-age, and rock music."

"Fiona's a big fan. I haven't heard them perform live."

"Don't stay up too late, Mark Antony. Big day tomorrow," Peter admonished.

"I don't remember Julius Caesar ever setting curfews for Mark Antony," Neal grumbled. "Aren't you supposed to be off mapping a campaign somewhere?" He wandered off and started talking with Janet.

Probably asking for photos, Peter thought with a sigh. He could see his chances of not having the rest of the division know about this excursion evaporating away in tiny popping bubbles.

As the group prepared to leave the warehouse, El pulled Peter aside. "Janet didn't want to leave me out of the cosplay. She fixed me up with a Roman goddess costume. Thought you might like to know. With Neal not coming over, we'll have to find something else to do. Any suggestions, mighty Caesar?"

Peter responded with a wink and a one-arm hug. Maybe there was something to be said for cosplay after all.

**WCWCWCWCWCWCW**

Back at White Collar, Peter called together the team for a final briefing. Cautioning them not to get so carried away with role-playing that they lost sight of the seriousness of their op, he said, "Whoever organized the theft of the Sword of the Tiberius and the coins is a dangerous criminal. We don't know if he was the one who killed Slattery or if it was someone working for him, but in any case he already has one death to answer for."

"Travis and Badillo will handle communications from the surveillance van and other assistance as needed," Tricia continued. "We're going to be spread very thin to cover such a large venue. Frequent communication is vital. Everyone should report in every fifteen minutes with updates. Travis will transmit the reports to our earpieces so everyone will be aware of what the other agents are doing."

"If anyone sees or hears of a potential suspect, contact the others," Peter warned. Careful not to look at Neal, he added, "Don't go off investigating on your own. Call the nearest available agent to go with you."

"Doors open at 10 a.m. The surveillance van will be parked on West 34th Street. We shouldn't arrive as a group. No point in attracting undue attention," Jones said.

"I've already prepared assignments," Tricia said. "Diana, it's only fitting you go with Mark Antony here."

"Excellent choice," Neal said with a grin. "I'll be your protector from all the geeks stumbling over themselves to get to you."

Diana looked at him with disdain. "I can handle any geek. You just watch out for the booth babes who are going to swarm over you like bees to honey."

"And why should I be concerned about that? I—"
Peter broke in. "Children, behave. Continue, Tricia, please."

"Peter, you and I will arrive together. Since Jones is heading straight for the PC games area, he'll go in solo. I've prepared detailed maps both of the Javits Center and convention layout. We should make use of the remaining time today to commit everything to memory."

**Roaring Lion Pub near Columbia University. October 15, 2004. Friday evening.**

"Found us a table," Neal called out to Fiona. "It's over in the back corner. I'll fetch us some wine."

"I'll defend it from all would-be usurpers," shouted Fiona over the din of the crowd as she charged over to the coveted table.

The small pub, a favorite student hangout, was stuffed to overflowing with late Friday night partiers. Fiona grabbed two chairs while Neal forced his way to the bar. Arriving back at the table, he grinned at Fiona in triumph. "Mission accomplished. Two chardonnays, although after what we just heard, we probably should have gone for Irish whiskey instead."

"I can't believe how packed Miller Theater was. That was my first time there and to be able to see Clannad on their reunion tour—Neal, how were you able to scrounge those tickets at the last minute?"

"Friend of a friend. That was quite an introduction to Clannad. First live performance I've heard them give."

"I saw them in Ireland when I visited my mum's sister. Mum moved away to go to university, but most of her relatives still live there." Fiona's face was flushed with excitement. Her ash blonde hair glinted red in the dim lighting of the pub.

"I can tell you've got Celtic blood. You look like you belonged on stage with them. All the Irish I know sing. Do you?" Neal asked.

"I've done my share of singing," she admitted. "Folk music mainly—English, Irish ballads. What about you? Caffrey could be an Irish name."

"You're right, but it was a long time ago that my branch came over from Ireland. I've been learning about my family roots over the past few months. My grandfather said he was the grandson of Irish immigrants. Evidently singing's in our blood. I have one cousin who's majoring in music. Another cousin and I performed for a while. Not Celtic music though—angst rock was more our style."

Fiona looked startled. "You, a rock musician? It'll take me a while to wrap my head around that."

"I know—not the typical profile for someone in art history. In my defense, I was more into metal ballads than acid rock."

"What was the name of your group?"

"Urban Legend. We were fairly obscure. You probably haven't heard of us."

"Oh yes, I have. So you're a member of Urban Legend… Neal, I'm impressed," Fiona's green eyes opened wide in amazement. "Here I was thinking you were just a dashing FBI agent with a passion for art. And now I find out you're a rock star too. Anything else I should know?"

"I might have a few more mysteries up my sleeve. What about you? Have you ever sung publicly?"
"Not in the States but I did in the U.K., in Edinburgh. I went to the University of Edinburgh for my undergraduate degree—sang at some pubs there. Do you know what pub sessions are?"

"They're like our jam sessions, right?"

"Very similar. Musicians get together to play, network, drink. Lots of the latter—does wonders for stage fright," she added with a grin. "I think you said you're no longer with Urban Legend. Are you doing anything now?"

"Not publicly. I've been experimenting with different styles. You met Richard, the guy who has the studio next to mine? When you can pull him away from his art, he's an excellent jazz guitarist. We've been trying our hand at mixing jazz and rock with world music. Some of it has Celtic elements. You should come over sometime. A female voice would be a welcome addition."

"I just might take you up on that." Taking a sip of wine, she added "You know, I bet there are others who'd like to join in. I was talking with Keiko a few days ago. Did you know she plays the violin? She was bemoaning the lack of opportunity to play with others. Perhaps we should start something up ourselves."

"A band? You serious?"

"Sure, why not? We could take your fusion, throw in some new-age, add a dash of classical, stir in more Celtic… Neal, this could be fantastic!" Fiona was getting more and more excited as she talked, her British accent noticeably broadening in her enthusiasm.

"The ultimate garage band, in other words." Neal was skeptical that it would ever get off the ground, but Fiona was having so much fun thinking about it, he could play along.

"Exactly!" Fiona leaned forward as she brushed a wayward tendril off her face. "Okay, master ticket-scrounger, here's a challenge for you. How about scrounging us a garage?"

"I accept your challenge," Neal replied without hesitation. "A friend of mine has an art studio at Prentis Hall. The Computer Music Center is also there. I bet we could filch some time in one of their practice rooms. I've been there. From what I heard, a little extra noise would never be noticed."

"Let's try for Sunday evenings. Sometime late. That shouldn't interfere with schedules. You see about the studio. I'll start thinking of a name."

"Too bad Nightnoise is already taken. That sounds perfect for what you have in mind. But shouldn't we see if the group's even going to make before thinking of a name?"

"Definitely name first. That's the hardest part."

"Your logic's a little skewed—you know that, right?" Fiona looked beautiful. The scattering of freckles across her nose gave her an impish look that he was finding hard to resist. "You're really embracing this band idea."

"Yeah, maybe I'm feeling a little frustrated where I work. I need an outlet to burn off steam."

"The auction business isn't all it's cracked up to be? I would have thought Weatherby's would be an exciting employer."

"You'd think so, wouldn't you? But there are some real Neanderthals at the top. You call us Brits stuffy, but the head people at Weatherby's put us to shame. I would imagine the FBI has its
moments too."

She had a point—he'd done his share of banging his head against the wall over the past couple of months. His cousin Henry had shown him how he could use live performances to work through frustrations when they'd been on the road together. Earlier in the year Neal used to perform Thursday evenings during amateur nights sponsored by Randy Weston at the bar next to his guitar shop. But once Columbia started, his evenings were taken up with classes. This could serve as a substitute. Besides, hanging out with Fiona had a definite appeal. At least she wasn't sighin' about Bryan.

"You're on," he said clinking his wine glass to Fiona's. "I'll work on a studio. You better get busy on that name."

**Javits Center. October 16, 2004. Saturday morning.**

On a cool and crisp October morning, the sun shone brilliantly on the imposing glass and steel complex of the Javits Center. Space aliens and stormtroopers, Roman gladiators and elves, zombies and wizards, plus a wide array of other creatures filled West 34th Street and 11th Avenue as they poured into the modernistic frame structure, looking as if they were boarding a spaceship which would blast off into outer space. And here was Special Agent Peter Burke, aka Julius Caesar, preparing to board with them. How'd that happen again?

At least, he didn't have to worry that he would stand out and be ridiculed. Ha! His costume was definitely on the restrained side compared to the others he was seeing. Nudging Tricia, Peter asked, "Are you ready for this?"

She laughed. "Bring it on. My boys are so excited I'm here. I've promised them to take photos, all in character with my undercover role, of course."

"Naturally. It would be strange to be here and not take photos."

"Let's head for the expo hall and start mingling."

At 10:15 a.m. the first cross-check occurred. Everyone was in their assigned area and was fanning out to gather intel. Peter strolled over to a demo on *Circus Maximus: Chariot Wars* and began circulating. When the demo ended he headed toward the software vendors area. Boot camp had paid off. He could actually talk the lingo and surprised himself on how well he could spout off about something he understood so little. He could afford a little swagger in his walk.

Over on the other side of the hall, he saw Neal talking with some vendors in the merchandise area. Diana hadn't been wrong. He appeared to have a constantly changing entourage of scantily clad women in attendance. In Diana's last report she mentioned she was heading to the Xbox area. Peter passed it as he made his way through the hall and spotted Diana in the midst of a heated argument with some guy in a toga. Peter considered warning him he was going to get belted, but then thought better of it. Diana was having too much fun.

The noises level made it difficult to concentrate. How was a guy supposed to think with all the screeching of race car brakes, arcade music, exploding grenades, and machine gun fire? The mob scene was staggering. They must be at the center's legal occupancy capacity.

Peter escaped to the software vendor area where at least the game sounds weren't so distracting. He talked with several vendors who had tips on where the most avid gamers could be found but precious few trackable leads.
The team had arranged to meet in the Pillar of Autumn food court at 12:30 p.m. for status reports. Grabbing a Jackal burger and Flood Fries on the way in—and feeling inordinately pleased to recognize those as *Halo* references—Peter snared a table and waited for the others. When everyone had arrived, he started the briefing with a report on his lack of progress.

"I have a likely candidate," Neal spoke up. "And, by the way, booth babes are an amazing resource. Very underappreciated." Ignoring Diana's snort, he added, "Since their jobs consist in standing around and beguiling the attendees to buy whatever they're promoting, many of them have developed a keen sense of observation. One of them told me about Adrian Falco. She said he was a big spender. Always decked out in elaborate Roman outfits. She thought he'd be very interested in my coins."

"Neal had Travis research him in the van. I went out to help," Tricia said. "He manages the Aternum Hedge Fund and is reputed to have a net worth in the millions. He's known to be a collector of Roman and Greek artifacts. I couldn't find any links to gaming on the database. That's why he didn't show up earlier."

Tricia passed around a photo of a man of about medium height with close-cropped brown hair, gray eyes, and an athletic build. He appeared to be in his forties.

"I was told my best chance of finding him would be at a press conference," Neal said. "The Creative Assembly—they're the game developer of *Rome: Total War*—is having one on an upcoming title, *Spartan: Total Warrior*, this afternoon."

"Press conferences are a mob scene," Jones commented. "Gotta be prepared. There'll be hundreds present."

"That starts at 1:30 p.m. in Media Hall G," said Tricia, looking at her schedule. "Our best chances will be before and after the event."

"But there's another new game coming out that's generating a lot of buzz in the console room," Diana said. "It's called *Coliseum: Road to Freedom*. It's a fighting game and will be demoed at two o'clock in Media Hall B. I gather it's all about gladiator games and could have a lot of appeal to our profile."

"We'll need to cover both venues," said Peter. "From what you're saying, the press conference will have the most people. Tricia, I want you, Diana and Neal to handle it. Jones and I will monitor the demo. If anyone spots Falco, let the rest of us know. Be circumspect in how you approach him. He may be completely innocent and we don't want to be faced with a lawsuit by an irate fund manager. If we don't find anyone matching his description, we meet back here after the events to regroup."

Finishing his coffee, Peter studied the photo of Falco. Something about his expression bothered him. Hard to define. The expression was chilling.

"Anything wrong?" Neal asked.

"Just a feeling. Be careful out there, Neal."

Notes: The action takes a much more serious turn in the next chapter, Search and Rescue, which I'll post next Tuesday. In the meantime, if you'd like to see visuals of the team's costumes, head over to The Woman in Blue Pinterest board.
Randy Weston, the guitar shop owner, first appears in Caffrey Flashback by penna nomen. Neal's adventures with his cousin Henry when they toured as Urban Legend are also touched upon in that story and covered in much great detail in her Caffrey Disclosure.

Thanks to penna nomen for being such an inspiring muse and to you for reading!

Blog: Penna Nomen & Silbrith Conversation: www.pennasilbrithconversation.blogspot.com
Chapter Visuals: The Woman in Blue board at the Caffrey Conversation Pinterest website: www.pinterest.com/caffreycon

Jones hadn't been exaggerating when he said the demo would be a mob scene.

As Peter surveyed the crowd entering the hall, he realized having Falco's photo for a reference wasn't as helpful as it should have been. With the costumes and headgear fans were wearing, figuring out what they looked like underneath was damned frustrating.

Over lunch, the agents had divided up coverage of the two main press events for Roman games that had been scheduled for the afternoon. While Tricia, Diana, and Neal attended the Spartan: Total Warrior press conference, Peter and Jones focused their efforts on Media Hall B on the opposite side of the expo hall where a demo of a gladiator combat game was scheduled.

Jones was positioned on the opposite side of the hall from Peter for better coverage. By the time the demo started, neither one of them had found any likely suspects, but about ten minutes into the demo, Jones's voice came through his earpiece. "Got a possible, fifth row from the front, eight seats in. Wearing an expensive centurion costume."

Peter moved to an area where he could see the suspect. "You're right, he could be our guy. Couldn't get a good view of his scabbard, but the one he's wearing could be a match. As soon as the demo ends, we'll make our approach."

Peter checked in with Tricia while waiting. So far they hadn't come up with any suspects, but were continuing to survey the crowd.

"Do you want us to join you?" Tricia asked.

"No, he's by himself. Jones and I have this covered. You three continue to work the press conference in case this doesn't pan out."

When the demo ended, fans scattered in all directions to attend other events. Their suspect exited into a corridor on the opposite end of the hall. Forcing their way through the throng, Peter and Jones took off after him. As they entered the corridor they met an onslaught of fans arriving for the next demo. This one was for the latest title in the Knights of the Old Republic series and stormtroopers, Wookiees, and Darth Vaders were filling the seats. As Peter and Jones made their way down the corridor, the crowd began to thin but Falco was nowhere to be seen. How had he disappeared so quickly? Peter thought in exasperation. A Roman should be easy to spot in this sea of Star Wars costumes and they'd only been a few steps behind.

As Peter and Jones rounded a bend in the hallway, they saw a small group of stormtroopers approaching them. One of them lurched into Peter as he passed and then grabbed his arm when Peter stumbled. Trying to disentangle himself, Peter felt a small prick near his elbow.

"Sorry, man," he heard dimly as the hallway started to spin. Clinging to the stormtrooper's arm, his surroundings blurred. Even the stormtrooper was dissolving into an out-of-focus jumble of colors. Jones! Did he say that or just think it? All he could hear was a roaring in his ears. As he sank to the floor, he felt arms around him, pulling him up. He tried to call out, but couldn't open his mouth, couldn't form the words. . . . The roaring increased then nothing. . . .

WCWCWCWCWCWC
The press conference had now ended in Media Hall G. Careful scans of the crowd had turned up no one matching Falco's description. Neal stopped to tighten the laces on his Roman sandals. Hopefully Peter and Jones had better results with their suspect.

Diana looked to be equally bummed. Blowing her hair out of her eyes, she mumbled, "The next person who comes on to me is toast. Caffrey, this is the last time I'm ever letting you select my costume."

"I haven't heard anything from Peter in a while. Isn't he late to report? Tricia, have you heard anything?"

"No, I'll check with the van." Tricia called Travis on her communicator and spoke briefly with him. "Travis hasn't heard anything from either Peter or Jones for thirty minutes," she reported. "We better go check on them."

This wasn't like Peter. He wouldn't have gone off on his own and after all his lectures about keeping in contact, he wouldn't have forgotten to check in. Peter had cautioned him to be careful before they split up. Did he heed his own warning?

It took ten minutes to make their way through the packed expo hall, and by the time they arrived, the *Knights of the Old Republic* demo was in full swing. No Romans were in attendance.

"They must have already left the hall," Tricia said. "Start a search in the adjoining hallways. I want reports every ten minutes. Everyone stay sharp."

Neal headed off to the east. Walking down the corridor, he was relieved to spot a familiar face walking his way. "Hi, Dotty! How's my favorite toga girl?" He'd met her in the expo hall this morning. Dotty was a vivacious blonde whose skimpy toga left very little to the imagination.

"Mark Antony, what 'ya doing at a *Stars Wars* event? Did you get lost?"

"Not me, but a couple of friends did." Thanking all the Roman gods he could think of for bringing along several of the photos Janet had taken, Neal pulled out one of Peter and Jones. "Maybe you've seen them? I was supposed to meet them for a tournament, and they're late."

Dotty studied the photo carefully. "Oh yeah, I saw them. I remember admiring their costumes. A word of advice—you better round up some other gaming buddies for your tournament."

"Why? What happened?"

"I was going down the back corridor behind the stage and saw some stormtroopers helping them walk away. They were laughing and having a great time. Explained that your friends had been in a drinking competition and lost. They must have really tied one on, because from the looks of them they could barely stand up."

Neal laughed. "Some weekend gladiators! They'll live this one down. How many stormtroopers were with them?"

"There must have been at least six."

"Not a surprise. The Empire never plays fair. Thanks, Dotty."

"Anytime, Mark Antony." Dotty reached into a small bag attached to her belt and pulled out a card. "This is my phone number. Call me up sometime."
As soon as Dotty left, Neal called Travis to patch him through to Tricia. "Got a lead. A booth babe saw them being led off by at least six stormtroopers. Sounds like they were drugged. She thought they were drunk and on the verge of passing out." Repeating what Dotty had said, Neal could hear the note of panic creeping into his voice and fought to contain it.

No luck. Tricia had already noticed it. "Don't worry, Neal. We're going to find them. This gives us something to work with. Where did she see them?"

"Along the corridor that runs behind the stage of Media Hall B."

"Got it. I'll tell Diana. Meet us there."

Tricia, Diana, and Neal searched the corridor, but could find no trace of Peter and Jones. A few small offices opened into the corridor, but checking them out proved fruitless.

"It's now four o'clock," Tricia said. "We spend fifteen minutes trying to locate them or someone else who's seen them. If nothing turns up, we'll need to call for reinforcements."

"Won't that exacerbate the situation?" a worried Diana asked. "Seeing cops might send the kidnappers off the edge."

"We won't have a choice," Tricia replied grimly.

**WCWCWCWCWCWCWC**

Darkness . . . muffled sounds . . . Jones struggled to open his eyes, but couldn't. Nothing was working. He couldn't even move his hand. He could barely breathe. Fighting the paralysis gripping him, Jones willed his eyelids to open. It was like they'd been sealed with duct tape.

*Open your eyes, dammit.* . . . Finally he forced them open a crack. Squinting at the blurry shapes around him, he tried to remember what happened. That's right . . . stormtroopers. One of him shoved him then . . . nothing. Peter? Couldn't see him. Where was he? In front of him, fuzzy outlines of grandstands, towering shapes. Overhead . . . blackness.

*Need to let 'em know . . . Gotta . . .* At last forcing his thumb against his watch-communicator and praying he'd hit the **on** button, he mumbled "Arena" before all went black again.

**WCWCWCWCWCWCWC**

With every passing minute, Neal's anxiety mounted. He was the one who was supposed to be off the radar, not Peter. Running a hand through his hair, he forced himself to calm down, but it wasn't easy. He felt like running up to people and shaking them for information till someone coughed up something, anything. Was this what Peter went through when he went off script? No wonder he kept lecturing him. With all the masses of people here, surely someone else had seen something.

His earpiece crackled. "Travis here. I just got a message from Jones. One word: 'Arena'. I tried to call back, but no answer. Still nothing from Peter. I'm patching Tricia through now."

"Diana, Neal, meet me in the lounge area in the expo hall to the east of the arena."

When Neal arrived at the lounge, Tricia was already sitting down with the floor plan of the building spread out in front of her. Diana was walking back from the arena.

"It looks like the only entrance to the arena is on the front," Tricia said, "but I sent Diana to verify it."
"The entrance consists of three sets of double doors," Diana said as she took a seat. "They're all locked. I saw a man try to open them, but guards immediately came up and warned him away."

"I don't like this," said Tricia, chewing her lip. "We can't simply charge into the arena without knowing what we're going to find. We know there are at a minimum six men. With Falco that makes seven. But there may be many more inside. We could walk into a trap or cause a bloodbath."

Neal studied the building floor plan, searching for a way to access the interior. He forced himself not to think about Peter and Jones, but treat this as just another job. If this were a museum, how would he get in? As he analyzed options, that paralyzing sense of helplessness disappeared. And then it became clear.

Looking up at the others, he said, "There's always another way," and pointed to the expo hall ceiling high above them. "See how the ceiling is an open beam structure with lights suspended from the beams? According to the floor plan, there are four public floors to the building. Above the ceiling is a fifth floor maintenance level. The arena is also four-stories tall. That means the ceiling is right below the maintenance level just like the expo hall. Here in the hall, most of the walls are open with steel support columns and I bet the arena is the same way. It may be possible to gain access to the arena from the top level maintenance floor and then I could climb down one of the columns into the arena. The braces on the columns should give enough support for the climb."

Tricia shook her head. "I'm not happy with the thought of you pulling a Spiderman maneuver. You'd be on your own. What if you're spotted? We wouldn't be able to provide backup. What if you get stuck midway down? Then, there's the real possibility you might fall."

"Me, fall?" Neal stared at her, incredulous. "No need to insult a guy. Relax, Tricia, I know what I'm doing. In any case there's no assurance I'll be able to gain access to the beam structure from the maintenance level. But it's the only way I can think of to find out what's going on. Do you have another idea?"

"How would we play it if you do succeed?" Diana asked. "Suppose you manage to get down low enough that you can see what's going on. Assuming Peter and Jones are being held captive, how would you get us in there? If we broke through the doors, isn't that going to cause just as much disturbance as before?"

"What about if I'm able to distract them some way and you can sneak in for a surprise attack?"

"And how can you manage that?" Tricia asked.

"I'll know when I'm there," said Neal, confident he'd be able to devise a plan. "And as for you sneaking in, we can prepare for that in advance." Looking over at Diana, he quirked a smile. "For that I'll need an assistant."

It had taken some persuading, okay, a lot of persuading, but Tricia had finally agreed to his proposal to snake his way down four floors of steel beams to run clandestine reconnaissance. She'd given him her final lecture on safety precautions and the need for frequent updates, and it was now time to set the stage.

Neal left the lounge with Diana. As the two strolled through the expo hall, he put an arm around her and played with her hair.
"You could look like you're enjoying it more," he whispered into her ear.

"You're just lucky I haven't broken your arm," Diana muttered back as she caressed his cheek.

"I'm certainly not enjoying this myself either; this is purely one of those miserable jobs the conscientious FBI professional is called upon to perform." Neal nuzzled her neck and gave her a squeeze. "Keep working on your dewy-eyed look of infatuation," he couldn't resist adding.

"Can't you walk faster? We need to get to the arena doors today."

"Gotta sell the con first."

When they arrived at the arena, Neal pushed her against one of the double doors and kissed her passionately. Diana put her hands to his face, drawing his head down, and returned the kiss. Turning him so his right side was next to the door handles, she whispered seductively into his ear, "You better be opening that lock."

"Got it." Neal smiled down at her.

"Get a room!" a passing space alien yelled at them. A guard looked on with an air of sentimental indulgence.

After sauntering away together, Neal lowered his arm from Diana's shoulders.

"Good luck, Caffrey. We'll be listening for your updates," Diana said as he took off for the nearest elevator bank.

The elevators to the fourth floor conference rooms and offices were on the south side of the expo hall. With all the action taking place on the main floor, there was minimal use of the elevators. Arriving on the fourth floor Neal scanned it for the emergency stairs. He didn't want to risk using the service elevator which contained a higher probability of being detected. The stairs were at the end of the hallway. The door was rigged with an alarm but it was a simple matter of using a credit card to silence it. Neal darted up the stairs to the maintenance level. Listening at the door, he couldn't hear any sounds, so he risked opening it a crack.

He was at the end of a long corridor. No workers around. He was in luck—on a late Saturday afternoon there must only be a skeleton shift operating. The quiet hum of machinery was constant, but no conversations could be heard.

Quickly getting his bearings, Neal headed for the section over the arena. Along the way were a couple of locker rooms and maintenance areas containing massive pieces of equipment. Slipping into a storeroom, he scanned it for supplies. He couldn't count on finding anything useful in the arena, and he had no equipment on him. Fortunately the storeroom was well-equipped. Monofilament, polyester rope, wire cutters, gloves, lubricant spray—all those had potential. But carrying them while climbing down a support beam was not going to be possible. As a last resort he could wrap them in his cape and make a makeshift bag of it, but the risk was high that something could fall out and alert the guards.

Neal rifled through the boxes lining the walls. In one of them he hit pay dirt—a stash of tool pouches. Grabbing one of them, he stuffed it with supplies and then used his cape as padding to keep the items from rattling. Slinging the pouch over his shoulder, Neal headed out. Spiderman was ready.

Access to the fourth floor ceiling beams apparently was achieved by means of large square panels which were located at various locations on the floor. Picking the one closest to the arena, Neal
crouched to examine it. The panel was controlled by an electric motor. Once the safety lock was disengaged, the panel was opened by pressing a button.

Elated, Neal called in a report of his progress. "I'm over the arena now and preparing to open the ceiling panel. Will update after I'm in."

Before he pressed the button, Neal checked the wiring. These systems normally had a built-in alarm—a warning signal that sounded when the panel was opened. If he didn't find it in advance, his plan would end ignominiously before it even started. The blue wire appeared to trip the signal. Neal cut the wire and held his breath for any alarm.

All was quiet. If something went off in a control room, he'd have to deal with that later. Maybe they'd think it was a false alarm. Just for a second his mind wandered back to the Louvre. Dropping down into the Richelieu Wing … Only then he was after a painting. Big difference now. Lives were at stake. Any slipup and he wouldn't be the one paying the price, it'd be Peter and Jones.

Neal pressed the button and the panel slid open quietly. After a quick glance below he dropped through the opening, landing on a small ladder which took him down to the grid of structure beams overlaying the ceiling. A button next to the ladder closed the panel above him.

"I'm in," Neal whispered into his communicator. "Moving my way to a side beam. I'm over the arena, can see the grandstands below. Five men dressed as centurions moving around on the stage. No sign yet of Peter and Jones."

Neal's position when he dropped from the ladder was over the back part of the stage. Scanning the area below, he could see what must be a storage area or rooms behind the stage. The solid ceiling made it impossible to see inside. The grandstands formed a large horseshoe around the stage. If he climbed down the columns next to them, he could be spotted. But there appeared to be dark alcoves between the ends of the grandstands and the back area that would enable him to drop unnoticed.

Sprinting lightly across the beams to the southwest end of the arena, he prepared to start the descent. After he called in his update, Tricia was patched through. "Keep your communicator turned on so we can monitor what's happening as you go down."

"Will do." Neal performed a quick assessment of the beam structure. Maneuvering across the ceiling beams had not been an issue. They were designed for workmen larger than him to work comfortably, but the vertical columns were another matter. They had not been built to be climbed. But if he took advantage of the bolts and braces on the beams, it should be possible. Still even Houdini took precautions.

Neal put on the gloves he'd obtained in the storeroom and slung the rope around the column, tying it to his waist. He debated bothering with it. If it became snared on something, it'd ruin everything. But if he slipped… No latitude for mistakes—Peter and Jones were depending on him. Neal tightened the rope around his waist.

Fortunately his sandals had flexible soles so it wasn't necessary to remove them. If he tried to climb down the column with bare feet, he'd have a better grip but the sharp edges of the braces could slice his feet to ribbons. Would the soles last the beating they were going to get? He'd soon find out.

Swinging silently over the ceiling beam, Neal started his descent.

Gingerly reaching down with his feet, he slowly went down five feet and then paused to reassess.
"It's working," he whispered into his communicator. *It has to,* he thought to himself.

Inching down another fifteen feet, he paused to wipe the sweat off his face. The heat at the top of the building was intense and appeared to be affecting his eyes. Must have gotten some sweat in them. Neal shook his head and blinked furiously, but it wasn't helping. Steadying himself on a brace, he rubbed his eyes. His eyes were clouding so badly, he was becoming dizzy.

This was bad.

Not just his vision was being affected. The roaring in his ears was blocking all other sounds.

Neal's heart stuck in his throat when the ceiling tilted and rotated over him. Swallowing down the nausea and the panic, he clung to the column. He tried looking down, but that only increased his nausea.

*Breathe, just breathe, this will pass,* he kept repeating to himself. *Breathe, breathe.*

But the more he tried to calm himself down, the worse it got.

Fixing his eyes on the ceiling which was now dissolved into a blurred grid of shadowy shapes, he slowly resumed his descent, and that's when he saw him. Looming out of the haze—Klaus.

Klaus screamed at him and climbed down the beam. He was only a few feet away. Neal involuntarily jumped back with a shocked cry. Losing his hold, he slid down some four feet before he could grab on to the column. His rope had gotten caught on a brace and acted as a brake, jerking him back painfully.

Gulping in air, he clung precariously to the column. His left thigh was throbbing painfully. The column must have cut into it when he tried to stop his slide. He gingerly felt down with one hand. Damn. It was bleeding. Did any drops fall below? Had they heard him?

Despairing, Neal scanned the area below. Tricia's voice came through his earpiece. "Neal, what's happening? I heard you cry out. What's going on? I can hear you panting. Talk to me, Neal."

Forcing himself to speak slowly, he whispered into the communicator, "I'm okay. Lost my grip for a moment. Must have been a rat. Don't worry. Continuing down."

The guards apparently hadn't noticed anything. It was fortunate he was still so high up. Gripping the column with his legs, Neal pulled out his cape and tore off a section off to wrap his thigh. Couldn't risk any blood falling below.

Neal inched his way down. By now his entire costume was coated in sweat. The cut on his leg didn't appear to be very deep but it continued to bleed, soaking through the fabric. Nothing more he could about that till he was on the ground. Every few feet Neal stopped to compress it next against the column, hoping to keep any blood from dripping on the ground.

When he was some twenty feet from the ground, he paused. His luck was holding—the corner he had chosen was still devoid of people. Four soldiers were talking among themselves in the grandstands. No sign of Peter or Jones. Whispering an update, he said, "I'll be on the ground shortly. Gonna check out the back area and then will report in. Stand by."

Mustering all his cat burglar expertise, Neal continued his stealthy descent, rotating his position on the column to be away from the grandstands for the last portion. Dropping lightly onto the floor, he sprinted behind a pair of large speakers. The makeshift bandage appeared to be holding but he tore off another section of his cape and wrapped another layer around as a precaution.
The stage had been converted into a battle arena with sand scattered on the floor. Several shields and assorted weapons were propped up around the perimeter. In the center two tall poles had been erected. Jones had mentioned gladiator combats were going to be staged there, but what were the poles for?

Neal darted around the corner to the back. The area behind the stage consisted of several small rooms. Stacks of equipment—fighting gear, shields, swords, javelins—were piled high among packing crates and sound equipment.

Voices could be heard coming from one of the rooms, and Neal crept over to investigate. The door was ajar and he was able to wedge himself into the opening to peer through the crack.

Peter and Jones were on the floor, propped up against a wall, hands bound behind their backs. They appeared to be drugged, their heads dropping listlessly onto their chests. No injuries that Neal could see. Four men were standing in front of them. They were all dressed in full Roman battle gear and bristled with armor. But their helmets were off and Falco was easy to recognize.

Falco was taunting his prisoners. "Not feeling so hot? Think you could fool me with those outfits? Hah! Do you take me for an idiot? I had Slattery's apartment bugged, and the camera picked up all your bungling attempts to discover me. I admit, I'm impressed you tracked me here. Didn't think you'd make that connection. Should have found that brochure. Lost points on that. But now I know you'll be worthy opponents for what's coming.

"It's a shame my soldiers never have the thrill of real gladiator combat. You're going to rectify that. In a few minutes you'll be brought to the arena. But you know I was thinking, it'd hardly be sporting if we didn't give my soldiers a break. After all, they've never been in a death match with real opponents. So we're not waiting for the drug to completely wear off."

Taking an hourglass from a shelf, Falco put it on the table. "The sand runs out in fifteen minutes at which time you'll be brought to the arena. You'll probably still be paralyzed, but you may be able to plea for mercy. And who knows? If you impress me, I may grant clemency. But I advise you to not count on getting a thumbs up. For now, in the best gladiator tradition, I leave you in peace to order your affairs. Your doom awaits you in the arena."

Neal backed away silently into an adjoining room as Falco and one other soldier left. The others had remained behind.

The significance of the poles was now obvious. They were going to be used to secure the prisoners where they'd be slaughtered. The condition Peter and Jones were in, they wouldn't stand a chance. What kind of sadistic monster was Falco? And now it was up to Neal to come up with a plan to stop his nightmare scenario from becoming reality. It was so tempting to call in the cavalry. What had he been thinking? This was no snatch-and-grab from an art gallery.

Or was it?

If he could drill down on the diversion—provide the snatch—Tricia and Diana could manage the grab.

Neal sneaked back to assess the layout of the arena, taking note of the short hallway leading from the entrance doors to the grandstand. A viewing area had been set aside for dignitaries. That must be where Falco planned to watch the combat. Falco and four others were on the stage readying equipment. The sound system had been turned on and crowd noises were coming out of the speakers. The sound system was top quality. It was hard not to believe the stands were packed with an impatient horde of bloodthirsty fans. Neal eyed the enormous speakers speculatively. The
outline of a plan was emerging.

He darted back to the storage area and quickly surveyed the contents of the other back rooms. Most of them contained costumes and spare office furniture, but one looked more promising. It was being used to store sound equipment and recordings, even a few stereo systems.

Confident he'd located what he needed, Neal reported in. "Found Peter and Jones. They've been drugged. Can't see any injuries but they appear paralyzed. Falco intends to make them gladiator victims during a combat he's staging. They won't stand a chance, Tricia. This isn't a game. It's a slaughter."

"I've called up reinforcements," Tricia said. "They're waiting for my signal just outside the expo hall. Should we move in now?"

"Too risky. The soldiers may be dressed as centurions, but they also have AK-47s slung over their shoulders. There are eight soldiers, including Falco. Two guards are in the room with Peter and Jones. There'd be no way to protect Peter and Jones if you charge in now. Falco's giving Peter and Jones fifteen minutes—supposedly enough time to be aware of what's happening, but not so much they'll be able to move around. I'm gonna take advantage of that to prepare a diversion which will take out at least some of the soldiers and will keep them from noticing you. There's a short hallway that leads from the doors to the grandstand. When I give you the signal, go ahead and move into the hallway. There'll be enough noise, no one will hear you. You'll be able to sneak up to the grandstands and disarm them. There are a couple of AK-47s on the grandstands near the door. Grab those on your way in."

"Wait, Neal, what are you pl—"

"Sorry, no time." Neal raced back to the storage room.

Notes: Major thanks are due to Penna Nomen for this chapter. Neal and I would still be struggling to climb down the beam if it weren't for her.

If you want to meet Adrian Falco in his Roman regalia, head over to The Woman in Blue board at our Caffrey Conversation Pinterest site at www.pinterest.com/caffreycon.

Many thanks for your comments to the last chapter! They gave me lots of ideas for the future and are worth more than Roman gold coins.
**Conquering Heroes**

**Javits Center. October 16, 2004. Saturday afternoon.**

In less than fifteen minutes Peter and Jones would be brought to the arena. Rescuing them before Falco could carry out the hellish slaughter he'd devised hinged on one of the craziest schemes Neal had ever dreamt up. If all went perfectly, he'd be able to put several soldiers out of action, paving the way for Tricia and Diana to apprehend the others. If everything didn't go perfectly . . . but no time to think about that.

Neal raced back to where he'd spotted the sound equipment earlier and frantically skimmed through the CDs. He hadn't realized he was holding his breath till he found the object of his search. He let out a long exhale. This plan might have a chance after all. A CD like this could be the missile to throw any centurion into a tailspin.

Now it was a race against the sand flowing out of that damned hourglass. Loading the CD into a sound system, Neal tested it with headphones, adjusted the volume and then placed it on a stand in the center of the small storage room. There was ample speaker cable to connect to two of the large outside speakers close to the stage. Setting up sound equipment was something Neal had extensive familiarity with under his Neal Legend alias. He was going to put that knowledge into play now. Sneaking up to the speakers to attach the cables, he could see Falco's soldiers moving javelins into the arena. Falco was conferring with one of them.

Sprinting back to the supply room, Neal whipped out his spool of monofilament and stretched it low and tight across the room just inside the door entrance. Anyone walking through the door would be focused on the stereo system, not the floor. And for the final touch, he got out the spray can he'd taken from the fifth floor maintenance storeroom and sprayed the concrete floor liberally with lubricant.

He kept listening for sounds from the guard room that Peter and Jones were being moved, but so far it was quiet. Too quiet. Neal crept up to the door of the room where Peter and Jones were being held. Through the crack, he could see two guards practicing lunges and battle moves. There was still about a quarter of the sand left in the hour glass.

Peter and Jones appeared to be tracking the actions of the guards with their eyes, but Neal couldn't detect any movement of their legs or arms. They were probably still paralyzed. What they must be thinking. . . . Neal ached to give them some sign of encouragement, let them know help was on the way.

Deciding it was worth the gamble, he waited till the guards were facing the opposite wall and then darted in front of the door opening, pausing just long enough for Peter and Jones to see him. They blinked their eyes in recognition. Giving a large thumbs up and blazing what he hoped was his most optimistic megawatt grin, he then dashed back out of sight.

Neal hadn't initially planned on being able to set a second trap, but the first one had gone faster than expected. A second one would provide insurance against any malfunctions.

A few minutes later, Neal took his position behind a large metal cabinet he had scouted earlier. It was close to the back rooms but also commanded an unobstructed view of the stage. "Tricia, you ready?" he whispered. "It's about to start." Travis patched in Tricia's reply. The reinforcements had moved into the expo hall, but were hanging back to not alert the guards in case they were in
communication with Falco.

Neal watched and waited.

Some of the soldiers were bringing out the battle gear Neal had spotted when he'd first headed to the back storage area. One of them stopped and knelt to look at something on the ground. "Hey, did one of you get cut? Someone's been bleeding."

Neal flattened himself against the cabinet as the soldiers checked themselves out. "Nah, but those javelins are razor-sharp," one of them said. "My money's on Bruce. The guy was jumping out at me earlier with his javelin. Must have nicked himself."

"Good thing the prisoners are going to be tied up. He'll probably fall over himself anyway. The only gladiator in history to slaughter himself rather than his opponent in the arena."

Laughing, the soldiers moved on.

Neal's heart was racing, a thousand doubts surfacing. He hadn't had a chance to test the external speakers. What if they were defective? He had set the volume on maximum, but would that be loud enough? If it weren't, he'd have to call in Tricia and Diana anyway and somehow manage to shield Peter and Jones from the carnage. Those rifles in the grandstands... could he get his hands on one of them? But he'd have to pass very close to Falco to get to them. His risk of being spotted was high, and there wasn't time now in any case. If he were carrying a gun himself, he'd have more options...

It must have been only a couple of minutes before he heard the sounds of the guards dragging Peter and Jones out. They were being supported on both sides. Hard to tell if the paralysis had left. If it had, they weren't letting on. When they got to the stage, the guards tied them to the poles in the center of the stage. Falco and three other soldiers were in the viewing platform. The sound speakers continued to blast out crowd noises.

Falco stood up and raised his hands. The crowd was silenced.

"Fellow Romans, we are gathered here today to—"

The jingle-jangle, calypso tune of the Super Mario Brothers theme blared through the arena, drowning out his next words. The volume was deafening enough to raise any Mario fan from the dead.

The soldiers stopped dead in their tracks in dumbfounded amazement. Falco, wild-eyed, let loose a flood of curses probably not employed by centurions in ancient Rome. He screamed at his men to find the source and annihilate it.

Two of the soldiers raced to the back rooms. Quickly locating the offending sound system, they ran through the doorway only to be tripped up by the wire. Sliding on the grease they fell crashing into stacks of equipment, their curses and groans mingling with the thuds of overturned boxes and clangs of overturned metal. Neal swiftly closed the door and tied the door handle to a support beam. He then shoved a large container in front of the door.

"Now!" ordered Neal into his communicator. By the time the soldiers managed to escape, the FBI welcome committee should be ready for them. Neal dashed to a second sound system and turned on the soundtrack from RollerCoaster Tycoon. The resulting earsplitting cacophony of merry-go-rounds and Mario was enough to bring out the gods from Mount Olympus.

Hiding in the wings, Neal saw two more soldiers run to investigate, while the banging of the door...
of the first room alerted him that the first two angry victims were preparing to swarm out like hornets. The second arrivals were even more hapless than the first. Losing their footing when they hit the greased corridor, they smashed into walls even before they got to the sound system.

After barricading the second door, Neal ran back to the stage, where Tricia and Diana had already taken Falco and the remaining soldiers into custody. Additional FBI agents were pouring into the arena. "There are four more in the back rooms," Neal said to the agents as he passed them. "Be careful of your footing—the floors have been greased."

Neal headed to Peter and Jones and was quickly joined by Tricia and Diana. Together they untied the ropes and eased them onto the ground.

"I've had the EMTs on standby. They should be here any minute," Tricia said.

Peter and Jones still were not able to stand on their own but were slowly regaining their ability to move their limbs. Neal sat down on the floor next to Peter, half-supporting him, half-hugging him in relief. "It's over. You're safe now. Falco said the drug would wear off, and I'm holding him to that. You're safe . . . You're safe." The words were just as much for his own benefit as for Peter's. The nightmare was finally over.

Leaning against him, Peter managed a smile. At the sight, Neal broke out in an exhausted one himself. To his left, Diana and Tricia were helping Jones. "How is he?" Neal asked.

"He's going to be fine," Tricia said and judging from Jones's decidedly blissful expression at being attended by Hippolyta and Cleopatra, Neal had to agree.

Peter had turned his head slightly to see Jones too. "Sorry, you got the short end of the stick. You're stuck with me," Neal told him with a grin.

Shaking his head, Peter patted his arm. He looked frustrated at his inability to get any words out.

"Don't worry," Neal assured him. "You'll be back ordering me about in no time."

The medics arrived shortly afterwards. Moving Peter and Jones onto lowered gurneys, they performed the initial assessment and fitted them with oxygen masks before raising the gurneys in preparation for the trip to the hospital. Once the gurney was raised, Neal got up himself to follow Peter out. Not his most graceful move. His injured leg had seized up from sitting too long, making him stagger when he put weight on it.

"Whoa, you okay?" the medic asked, quickly steadying him.

"Yeah, I'm fine," Neal said, "Stiff leg, that's all."

Peter started fumbling with his oxygen mask only to have his hand intercepted by Neal. "Oh no, you don't. That mask stays on."

"Neal, you sure you don't need the medics to check you out too?" Tricia asked.

"No, I'm fine—Peter, stop trying to take that mask off or I'll tell El." This was the first time Neal had ever been on the enforcing end of an oxygen mask, and he fully intended to make the most of it. "Go ahead—keep rolling those eyes. It's good exercise. Just relax and enjoy the ride," he said, keeping his hand firmly planted over Peter's.

When they were ready to leave the arena, Tricia pulled Neal aside. "I should warn you—be prepared for quite a reception when we leave. While we were waiting for your final call, the
reinforcements and EMTs were entering the hall. Fans thought we were getting ready to stage a performance. A large crowd had already gathered, and with all the racket we've been making, I'm sure their numbers have increased."

As Tricia had predicted, their exit from the arena was greeted with the kind of fanfare Neal had never experienced before. Up to now, every time he had sneaked into a place, he'd been only too happy to make his exit as stealthily as possible. Now it was like he was a conquering hero.

When Falco and his soldiers were led off by FBI agents in handcuffs, wild cheers and applause erupted. Did the fans even know what they were clapping for? Peter and Jones, still in their Roman regalia, were wheeled off on gurneys, escorted by their honor guard composed of Diana, Tricia, and Neal. The sight of the women in their Hippolyta and Cleopatra costumes with AK-47s slung over their shoulders brought out fans rushing to snap photos of them. Some even tried to get autographs. It seemed as if the surreal experiences of the day would never end.

**Bellevue Hospital. October 16, 2004. Saturday evening.**

Neal and Diana had accompanied Peter and Jones to the hospital while Tricia returned with the prisoners to oversee their processing. Once they arrived, Peter and Jones were quickly wheeled off to be examined. Diana left to make a raid for coffee while Neal called Elizabeth. He limited himself to a brief explanation that Peter had been drugged but was recovering. Privately he hoped she'd never have to know the details of the slaughter that Falco had planned.

Elizabeth appeared to take it in stride. She didn't go to pieces as Neal feared she might, simply stating she'd arrive there shortly with a change of clothes. How many times before had she rushed to the hospital after Peter had been injured? It was ironic that Neal was trying to reassure her—she was being a lot calmer about the ordeal than he was.

Neal slouched in the chair of the waiting room. The adrenaline that had kept him going throughout the climb and aftermath had been wrung dry and all that remained was exhaustion. For the first time he realized how much his legs and arms ached. The wound on his leg was throbbing painfully and he must have wrenched his neck when he slipped on the column.

Gloomily Neal reflected on that mishap. His plan to desensitize himself from flashbacks appeared to need a few refinements. At least his flashback hadn't caused a disaster, but it'd been perilously close. He was putting others at risk if he couldn't control it. They were counting on him and he'd nearly messed up badly. A part of him longed to talk it through with Peter. But if he did, Peter would have no choice but to take him off field work. And what would have happened if Neal hadn't been there? How many people might have died?

"Hey, it's all right. They're going to be fine." Diana had come back with the coffees. She sat down next to him, handing him a cup, and gazed at him with more sympathy than he'd ever seen her express. Did he look that miserable?

"Sorry, I know." Trying not to look like the wreck he felt, he sat up straighter. Looking over at her, he couldn't resist a tired laugh. "I'll remember this moment—Cleopatra strolling down the aisle, bringing me coffee in an emergency room. Janet won't be very happy with the shape our costumes are in."

"You're looking a little worse for wear yourself, Mark Antony, and it's not the costume I'm talking about. Shouldn't you have your leg elevated?"

"No need. It's okay." His own injury was the last thing on his mind right now.
"You better have it examined while you're here. I don't want you coming down with gangrene and then blaming me."

He shook his head firmly. "Won't happen. You're getting nothing but praise from me, Cleo. You didn't even attack me with an asp."

The emergency room's receptionist called out, "Families of Peter Burke and Clinton Jones?"

Neal and Diana walked up and introduced themselves. An ER doctor came over to speak with them. The young attractive brunette looked them over, apparently startled by their costumes.

"Diana?" she asked hesitantly.

"Christie?" Diana appeared equally uncertain.

"You two know each other?" Not that he needed to ask, but he was curious how they'd answer.

Turning to him, Christie introduced herself. "Sorry, I'm Dr. Christie Vintner. Seeing Diana as—who are you supposed to be? Cleopatra?—caught me by surprise."

"You and me both," said Diana. "Neal, we've already met, in slightly different circumstances. I didn't know you were a doctor."

"And I didn't know you were—"

"FBI," explained Diana. "This disheveled specimen standing next to me is Neal Caffrey. He's also with the FBI. We were conducting an undercover op at N-Con. Peter Burke and Clinton Jones are fellow agents. How are they?"

"Come on back with me and you can see them. They're both recovering well. I'd like to keep them for observation a little while longer to make sure there are no lingering effects from the drug, but then they can be released to rest at home."

"Do you know what it was?" Neal asked as they walked down the corridor.

"From the symptoms I strongly suspect a gelsemine derivative but we'll know for sure when the blood work comes back." Taking a closer look at Neal, she took in his makeshift bandage. "What happened to your thigh?"

"I scraped it on a column—long story—it's just a scratch."

"It should be examined. You can't leave until then," Diana ordered. "Christie, would you mind . . . ?"

"Not at all—I'll take a look," Christie assured her.

Neal walked behind them along the corridor, fatigue forgotten as he studied Diana. This was a different Diana from the one he'd always seen. Her hard edges had softened, her voice was gentler. She seemed almost flustered when she first saw Christie, and he could have sworn she blushed when Christie asked her about her costume. Interesting.

Christie was explaining, "Since both agents are suffering from the same drug, we put them in the same room," and she led them into a double-sized examining room. A curtain which normally separated the two beds had been pulled back.

Propped up on pillows, both Peter and Jones were looking remarkably better from when they'd
arrived. They were alert and obviously very happy to see them.

Smiling broadly Neal said, "Typical—I thought we'd find you reclining on couches. You elite Romans are all alike. Any maidservants bringing wine around?"

"Is that what's flowing in these tubes?" said Peter. "You should pull up couches and join us. Jones and I've been lying here trying to piece together what happened. I was a blank till coming to in the storeroom. When Falco was talking to us, I could hear his words but I wasn't able to move—it was like every muscle was frozen."

"Assuming you were injected with gelsemine, that's a good description for the condition," said Christie. "It's essentially a nerve poison. A strong dose can cause paralysis of the brain and spinal cord. That's why you also experienced a vision loss. Fortunately its effects wear off rapidly, and the dosage wasn't strong enough to cause permanent damage."

"I felt like I was in some nightmarish video game gone horribly wrong," said Jones. "I understood what Falco was saying, but it was all so surreal, I couldn't believe it was happening. And then all the confusion in the arena, the music blaring." Looking over at Neal, he added, "You're one hell of a DJ, you know. I never thought I liked Mario, but I'm changing my opinion—it's kinda catchy."

"And Diana, seeing you and Tricia storm in and arrest Falco—that's one Kodak moment I wish I had a photo of," Peter added. "What's his status by the way? How about the soldiers? Caesar's crying out for information."

"I talked with Tricia a few minutes ago," Diana replied. "Falco and his crew are all in custody. Their bluster quickly deflated like a punctured balloon. Tricia said they were in a state of shock they'd been outwitted."

"Injuries?" asked Peter.

"Several of his soldiers suffered bruises and sprains caused by some thoughtless person who sprayed grease all over the back room floors," she said, shaking her finger at Neal. "And then, Mark Antony here has a few battle scars from climbing down a four-story column."

Christie indicated a chair for Neal to sit on. "Let me have a look."

Propping his leg up on a stool, she unwrapped the cloth. Neal hadn't taken the time to examine it and wasn't sure how bad it was. The wound looked impressively angry but fortunately wasn't deep enough to require stitches.

"You're lucky it's not worse," Christie commented as she cleaned it. "When did you last have a tetanus shot? Your legs have an interesting assortment of scrapes. Would you like some ointment for them?"

"Yes, he would," ordered Diana. "And give him the shot, too. Better make it a double dose. He has a propensity to go off the reservation. And don't give me any grief about it, either," she warned as she saw Neal start to protest.

"Do as she says, Caffrey. You don't wanna mess around with Cleo," urged Jones from his hospital bed. "Words to live by," Peter agreed solemnly.

Diana eyed them both smugly. "You know, I'm starting to dig this Cleopatra vibe."
"I'll get it," El said quickly when the doorbell rang. Peter sank back down on the couch. Satchmo whined at him as if in sympathy. "We'll sneak out later for a walk," he whispered to the Labrador, "when she's not looking."

"How's the patient?"

Peter smiled when he heard the voice. "Come in, Mark Antony," he called out. "Julius Caesar feels perfectly fit and doesn't need to be fussed over."

"Peter Burke, world's worst patient," El said, shaking her head in an amused reproach as she and Neal walked into the room. "I was just making coffee. Would you like a cup?"

"Please. May I help?"

"No, take a seat and keep Peter from overexerting himself."

"My pleasure, and as Caesar's loyal lieutenant you could say it's my duty," Neal said, sitting down next to Peter. "How are you feeling, really?" he asked in a low voice after El had left.

"Absolutely fine," Peter reiterated firmly as he sat up on the couch. "Do you have any news?"

"I talked with Tricia an hour ago—she sends her regards, by the way—and Falco is being unexpectedly cooperative. It makes me wonder if his lawyers aren't trying for an insanity plea brought on by game addiction."

"I'm not that surprised at Falco's change of attitude," Peter remarked. "Until they're caught, criminals often think they're invincible and nothing can stop them. Once arrested, reality sets in and they fall over themselves to make a deal."

Neal relaxed back in his chair and folded his arms behind his head. "Of course, in some cases, such as my own, that feeling of invincibility is warranted."

"Once we'd caught you, you would have been singing another tune."

"Such a shame you'll never get to test your theory," Neal deadpanned.

"That suits me just fine." Neal ribbing him about never having been caught had become their standard joke, and the fact that it could be treated that way made Peter more than happy to be teased about it.

El came back into the room with the coffee. "How's your leg?" she asked Neal, handing him a mug. "Don't you need to elevate it?"

"No, it's not giving me any trouble," Neal said.

"Ignore him," Peter said. "He needs cushions for it. I'll happily relinquish the couch, so he can—"

Rolling her eyes, El interrupted him, "You see what I mean, Neal. Incorrigible."

"Maybe this will help," Neal said, handing Peter the package he'd been carrying.

"What's this?" Peter asked, genuinely surprised.

"It's nothing much," Neal said, looking a little embarrassed.
El got up to see what Peter was holding. "The Ultimate Yankees Crossword Puzzle Book—Neal, it's the perfect gift. This will keep him down for quite a while."

"I figured you'd had your fill of video games."

"You can say that again. After yesterday, I'm sticking to crosswords."

The ringing of the phone interrupted them. It was El's mom and she left to take it in the other room.

"Does El know what Falco intended to do?" Neal asked Peter in a low voice once El was out of earshot.

Peter shook his head and replied equally quietly, "Not the details and I intend to keep it that way."

"I'm glad. Better not to know." Neal put his coffee down and hesitated, rubbing the side of his neck. "Any nightmares last night?"

Peter shrugged in silent acknowledgment. "You?"

"I've slept better. I still can't get it out of my head . . . What Falco was planning."

The kid did look stressed. Peter sympathized with what he was going through. He'd been there too often himself. "It's hard, isn't it, knowing others are in danger and it's up to you to do something about it."

Neal nodded in agreement.

"Remember that feeling the next time you want to fly off on a whim."

Neal smiled wryly. "Message received . . . and understood."

Peter tossed a couple of cushions on the coffee table. "So what do you say, let's make El happy—you put your leg up on these cushions, I stay flopped out on the couch, and together we work a crossword?"

"Deal," Neal said with a contented sigh as he stretched his leg out, "although I knew I should have bought that book of fine arts crosswords."

"Yeah, right. Prepare to expand your horizons."

WCWCWCWCWCWCWCWC

On Monday both Peter and Jones were back at work. The case against Falco was being wrapped up in record time. Ballistics had matched the bullet found in Slattery with the gun on one of his soldiers and a stockpile of the drug used on Peter and Jones was found in Falco's house. The contents of the house were being inventoried and run through the stolen items database, but so far everything else appeared to be purchased legitimately. The one outstanding issue was the identity of the hacker, the man behind the mysterious glowing branch. During questioning, Falco claimed ignorance over how the robbery was conducted. He admitted hiring Slattery, but professed to have left all the details to him.

On Tuesday morning, Peter was reviewing Tricia's report about the events at N-Con when Neal knocked at the door. "Got a minute?" he asked.

"Sure thing, take a seat," Peter said.
Neal lounged in a chair. "Just heard from the curator at the Brooklyn Museum. He's coming this afternoon to pick up the recovered items. He's greatly relieved there wasn't any damage done to the scabbard. You can imagine his reaction when he heard it'd been worn at a gaming convention."

"I bet. This is one case that reads more like a video game review than an FBI op. I'd just finished reading Tricia's report. That was a tense moment when you were climbing down the column. Rats, you say?"

Neal shrugged. "They're everywhere in New York. I shouldn't be startled by them."

"Yeah, I would have thought an expert cat burglar like you would be used to them," Peter couldn't resist adding. It wasn't often Neal threw him such an easy pitch.

"Not the big ones."

"First a hawk, now rats—what's this fascination wildlife has for you?"

"What can I say? New York's a jungle." Neal's tone was light, but he looked uncomfortable. "About that, Peter—"

Holding up a hand, Peter said, "Wait, let me finish. All joking aside, what you did—climbing down the column, that diversion—I don't know of anyone else who'd have been able to pull that off. Eight men arrested and not a single shot fired, that's damned impressive. I gave you grief about being a spider monkey, but you demonstrated just how valuable it is to have one on our team. If you hadn't been there on Saturday, well, I just want you to know how much I appreciate what you did."

"Thanks, Peter. I couldn't have done it without Diana and Tricia."

"Now, what did you want to tell me?"

"It's not important. It can wait." Neal looked uncharacteristically subdued and devoid of his usual cockiness. That was a promising sign. If he continued to give Neal strokes about how valuable his other skills were to the team, perhaps he'd drop the idea of carrying a firearm.

Pleased with himself for hitting upon a solution to a problem that had been gnawing at him, Peter could afford to be expansive. "Sorry you had to miss your Saturday lecture. Do you need comp time to make it up?"

"Not necessary, thanks. All taken care of," Neal said with a mischievous grin. "I needed to interview a museum curator for the course, and the Brooklyn Museum curator was happy to oblige. I'm going to interview him when he comes in this afternoon. I need to write a paper at the end of the course, and thought museum security would be an appropriate topic."

"Great idea. That's one paper you'll have to let me read."

"Speaking of papers, that was another reason I wanted to see you." Looking a little hesitant, Neal handed him a form. "This is a reimbursement form for the metal I used to make the coins. I believe that's allowed?"

"No problem. I'll take care of it."

"Getting reimbursed for expenses is a new experience," Neal added happily. "I could get used to it. Jones suggested I submit it. I asked about my fencing expenses. Jones told me to check with you."
"Fencing expenses?"

"Yeah, for my Gary Rydell alias. Gary's supposed to be an expert, and to maintain the alias, I really should keep up my skill."

"This is a joke, right? I can't believe you'd ask the FBI to subsidize your fencing."

"It's no joke—not to me anyway," Neal countered.

"Cut the crap, Neal," Peter said, unable to contain his exasperation. "You realize Jones was playing a trick on you, don't you? Frankly, I wouldn't have expected this of him or that you would have fallen for it." Peter couldn't believe what he was hearing. What possessed Jones to lead Neal astray like this? It didn't sound like him at all. And for Neal to think he'd get away with it... 

But instead of being embarrassed, Neal appeared baffled and genuinely upset. "I don't see how it's that different from being reimbursed for my coin supplies. It's all job related."

"If you can't understand how fencing is different from making supplies for an op, we're going to need to have a serious discussion. You're a smart guy. What makes you believe this would possibly be acceptable?"

Neal got up and started pacing the floor. "I thought my aliases were valuable to you. It's not just the aliases themselves, it's all the contacts who know me under a different identity. It hardly seems fair that you want me to keep them up, but then won't reimburse me for any of the associated expenses."

"Simmer down. I can't understand why you're so upset. Surely you can see why I can't sanction you fencing stolen items, even if it is necessary for your alias. You'll have to find—"

"Are you crazy?" Neal stopped in his tracks. "I didn't say anything about stolen items. This is fencing—fencing—you know, foils, sabres, Three Musketeers." He grabbed a letter opener from Peter's desk and sliced a Z in the air.

"Oh, that kind of fencing." Peter heaved a sigh of relief. "I didn't know you fenced, you know, fenced with a sword."

"Ever since I was a kid," Neal said, sitting back down and laughing. "Glad we got that cleared up."

"So, you're telling me Gary's not only an excellent fence but he also fences. Is he any good?"

"Not bad. If you ever need someone to go undercover as Errol Flynn, he's your guy. I joined the Chelsea Fencing Club this summer to keep up my skills. That's become a known hangout for Gary Rydell. Any chance the Bureau could help him out?"

"That we can take care of," Peter assured him, relieved to be able to cross off one looming Caffrey complication from his list. "Any other skills you've been hiding?"

"I'll get back to you on that," Neal said with a grin as he left the office.

Shaking his head, Peter chuckled. Fencing... He'd been meaning to ask Neal about that at the costume warehouse when he showed Jones how to hold a sword. Figures. Neal wouldn't go for anything as ordinary as bowling or basketball.

Interrupting his musings, his phone rang. Noting it was from an unknown number, he picked it up. "Peter Burke."
"Suit, we have a problem."

Notes: Neal's experience with sound equipment came from his years of touring with Henry under their aliases of Neal and Shawn Legend. Neal and Shawn's adventures are one of the fascinating themes in Caffrey Disclosure, currently being posted by Penna Nomen. She made many great suggestions for this chapter, including the encounter with Christie in the hospital, Neal's visit to the Burkes' afterwards, and Peter's confusion over fencing.

Blog: Penna Nomen & Silbrith Conversation: [www.pennasilbrithconversation.blogspot.com](http://www.pennasilbrithconversation.blogspot.com)
Chapter Visuals and Music: The Woman in Blue board at the Caffrey Conversation Pinterest website: [www.pinterest.com/caffreycon](http://www.pinterest.com/caffreycon)

At precisely two o'clock Peter put aside his paperwork, rose from his desk, and left the office. His destination was the Thomas Paine Park across the street from the Federal Building. When he left the Federal Building, he buttoned his coat against the sharp wind outside. It was a dreary, blustery day and the small park in Foley Square had only a few visitors. Feeling distinctly silly, Peter scanned the walk for a tic-tac-toe game marked in chalk, and when he found it, sat on the bench directly across from it. Pulling out his newspaper, he began working the crossword puzzle.

A few minutes later, a muffled voice behind him said, "You're not following protocol. That's supposed to be the international section."

Peter started to turn around—

"Don't look at me!" the voice muttered frantically.

Unbelievable. "Mozzie, you're the one who requested this meeting. I can't talk to someone I can't see. Get over here."

A moment later, Mozzie slid onto the bench next to him.

"Okay, I'm here. You said we have a problem—what's this all about?" Peter prompted.

"It's Neal. I'm worried about him and you should be too." Mozzie pulled out the sports section of The New York Times from his coat pocket and began scanning it. He added in a low undertone, "Keep your eyes on your paper. Don't look at me."

"Why? What's going on?" Would Mozzie ever give him a straight answer?

"Someone's trying to kill him. You need to protect him." With that, Mozzie rose to leave.

"Hold on a minute," Peter protested as he yanked Mozzie by the collar back down on the bench. "You don't just say that and then leave. Who's trying to kill him?"

"I don't know—that's your job, suit."

Exhaling, Peter said, "How do you know this? I can't act unless I have more information, so start talking."

Mozzie glanced furtively in all directions and apparently deciding the woman with the toddler twenty feet away didn't pose an immediate threat, reluctantly continued, "I assume you've heard of the Leopard?"

"Yeah, I've heard of him," said Peter cautiously, not liking the direction the conversation was taking.

"Look I shouldn't be telling you any of this, but I know Neal's your friend too. For some
unfathomable reason, he trusts you. Don't prove him wrong." He paused to scan the surroundings once more. "Neal used to work with the Leopard, and before you slap him in irons, it was in the past. Anyway, some Gestapo agency killed the Leopard a few weeks ago, and now they're out to get Neal."

"What makes you think that?"

"Whispers in the dark, pings in the ether—stir the tea leaves. The clues are obvious. First, Neal won't talk to me about the Leopard. I'm his trusted confidant. We talk about everything. Why this sudden silence? Second, he's not sleeping. He's hardly ever at home. He's avoiding me. I've checked with June. She rarely sees him. You know what that means?"

"Neal does have a heavy class load," Peter said helplessly.

"Use your brain," Mozzie said, his voice squeaking in his frustration. "I've observed him several times during the past couple of weeks sneaking out the mansion by climbing down the outside wall. It's obvious he's trying to protect me. Neal would sacrifice himself for me, for you, for anyone he cares about. By staying away from June and me, he's doing his best to save us. I've been trying to reach him, but I can't get through. You've got to save him!"

"Take it easy, Mozz. I'll look into it. I promise. If anyone has Neal in his sights, I'll find out."

"I'm counting on you. Neal is too—he just doesn't know it," he said in a calmer voice. "If you need to contact me, use this number, and leave the message: 'The sparrow dies at midnight.' I'll contact you." He slipped Peter a card by sticking it in his coat jacket.

Peter watched him scurry away and disappear into the crowd. How had he discovered about the Leopard? Neal had warned him that Mozzie's sources were extensive, but still... Trust Mozzie to create a conspiracy theory for everything. Peter had suspected Neal was distancing himself from Mozzie. If he were questioning Neal about the Leopard, that had to be the reason. And, even though his logic was cockeyed, Mozzie may have been right to be concerned. But past experience had shown that getting Neal to talk about it wouldn't be easy.

WCWCWCWCWCWCWC

Mid-morning the next day, Peter finished the last of his paperwork on the Brooklyn Museum robbery. Adrian Falco's days of glory reliving the Roman Empire had come to a satisfying end. The D.A. should have no difficulty prosecuting this case. Falco had been caught with the stolen items in his possession—add to that the attempted murder charges, and his hedge fund better start searching for a new manager. Falco wouldn't be available for a long time to come.

Looking out the window, Peter gazed at the brilliant sky outside. The Federal Plaza sparkled. The front which came through the previous day had ushered in the kind of weather which conjures up visions of football games and spiked cider. Much too beautiful to stay inside and the ideal opportunity to hatch his scheme. Picking up his empty coffee mug, Peter headed downstairs for a refill. Time for Step One.

Stopping off at Neal's desk, he found him at work on a copyright infringement case.

"How's the Martinez case coming?"

Neal looked up from his computer. "It's pretty straightforward. The counterfeit DVDs were obviously in his possession. Plenty of evidence to charge him on selling and trafficking counterfeit goods. Do you have a mortgage fraud case you'd like my assistance on?"
Peter studied him as Neal looked inquisitively his way. Was Mozzie right? Was he not sleeping? Maybe some dark shadows, but nothing like when he'd been cramming for his Columbia entrance exams. Mozzie may have been overworking it. Correct that, Mozzie always overworked it. "No, I'm more interested in your help with a conspiracy scheme."

"A conspiracy? That sounds more promising." Neal's face brightened. "A conspiracy to do something imaginatively nefarious, or, dare I hope—are we the ones conspiring?"

"I'll make your wish come true. I've made the unilateral decision we deserve comp time for last Saturday. As your supervisor I'm ordering you to accompany me to lunch and then a visit to my favorite museum. I hope I'm not going to hear any protests."

Neal leaned back in his chair and beamed. "I love it. As official business, this will be on the FBI tab, right? Won't we be conducting research?"

"Absolutely," Peter assured him. "Any guesses as to what my favorite museum is?"


"All fine museums and all wrong. Meet me at the elevators at noon and you'll find out. That gives you a couple of hours to finish your report on the Martinez case."

Leo's Deli on West 82nd Street was an institution: black-and-white tile floor, old-fashioned ceiling fans, photos of celebrity diners lining the walls, and small tables crowded together with gruff waitresses who looked like they could take down even Diana. This was definitely Peter's kind of restaurant.

Peter rubbed his hands together in anticipation. "Wait till you taste their pastrami. You'll be transported to gastronomic heaven. I'm amazed you haven't discovered this already. It's not that far from June's."

"Delis aren't normally my first choice." Neal attempting to look as eager as Peter. "I was waiting for a true connoisseur to take me."

Peter appropriated a table in the back corner. "I have to warn you the waitress will probably be a while bringing our sandwiches."

"Good. That gives me a chance to build up my appetite."

"You should have let me order for you. When you see mine, you'll regret ordering your wimpy chicken salad."

Neal glanced warily at him. Peter was being unusually jocular. This was a work day, after all. He'd been suspicious from the beginning of an ulterior motive. Now Peter was telegraphing it so plainly, he was starting to get nervous. But why? Had he been transferred to another section and Peter was trying to let him down gently? For the moment, Neal decided to play along. "I need time to build up to your level. I don't think I'm ready for pastrami, corned beef, and turkey all on one sandwich."

"Don't forget the coleslaw and fries."

"How could I? I won't need to eat for a month. I've also used my razor-sharp deductive powers to figure out what your favorite museum is. The Museum of Natural History is only a couple of blocks away. Can't resist the dinosaurs, can you?"
"My folks got me my first build-your-own dinosaur kit when I was five and I've been hooked ever since," Peter admitted. "My room back home was covered with dino skeletons. Went on many an excavating expedition in our backyard, that is, until I dug up my mom's favorite tulip bulbs and my shovel was confiscated." Peter shook his head in regret.

"Tell me more." Neal leaned forward in anticipation. He'd heard very little about Peter's childhood. It seemed like Peter was always trying to figure him out. This was a rare occasion to turn the tables. "I imagined you spent all your free time in the back lot playing baseball."

"I did my fair share of that too," Peter said with a nostalgic smile. "But when I moved to New York, the Museum of Natural History became my natural stomping ground."

"Just the place for a carnivore like you," Neal said as he eyed the immense sandwich platter which had been placed in front of Peter.

"I'd rather be a T-Rex than some scrawny bird-eater," retorted Peter with a disdainful glance at Neal's chicken salad.

"What we lack in brute force, we make up for with agility and stealthy grace," Neal hit back at him.

"You're just lucky Leo's doesn't condone food fights."

Neal decided to toss Peter the Dinosaur Hunter a bone. "It may surprise you that I've spent a fair amount of time there too. They had a fascinating exhibition of prints and rare books from their library last year."

"And I don't go there just for the dinosaurs. Big sky hunting is even more exciting."

"You lost me."

"Stargazing." Peter grinned as Neal stopped in mid-bite. "You're looking at a card-carrying member of the Upstate New York Astronomical Society. I built my first telescope when I was 10."

"Peter, I'm impressed. There are new depths to you I'm only beginning to learn about. Stargazing, huh?" He looked at Peter, trying to picture him as a kid with a telescope, most likely wearing a baseball shirt at the time.

"Yep, kept it up all these years. You'd be surprised what an effective pick-up line it was in college. Starlit evenings stretched out on a blanket, looking up at the stars. . . ."

"Now I'm more than impressed. I'm in awe."

"I keep a telescope at the cabin. The pick-up line still works with El," Peter said smugly.

Time to have a little fun with Peter the Big Sky Hunter. "When you were little, did you think you'd find space aliens on the moon with your telescope?"

"The thought had occurred to me. That must have started my interest in sci-fi."

"I'm surprised you're working at White Collar. I would have thought you'd be in the M.I.B. division or is White Collar just a front and I haven't been indoctrinated yet?" Although still wary, Neal was relaxing. He was collecting material he'd be able to tease Peter with for years. "I knew there was a reason I should be carrying a firearm. I'd like one of those miniature blasters Will Smith carried, please."
"Sorry, you're not a high enough level to know about M.I.B. Wait your turn, kid," Peter said, as he swatted Neal's hand away from his French fries. "I have to admit, I can relate to the *Men in Black*. There are so many New Yorkers I could easily picture as space aliens in disguise. Take Mozzie, for example. Confess, now. Don't you sometimes feel you could twist his head off to reveal a tiny space creature inside barking orders?"

"The thought never crossed my mind," Neal said with a laugh, "but it's a great conspiracy theory, one that even he might appreciate."

"Speaking of Mozzie, he came to see me yesterday," Peter added casually.

"You can't be serious. Mozzie at the FBI?"

"Well, no. Not in the office. That would be a bridge too far. It was in the park."

"Did he make you do the mockingbird thing?"

"No, the tic-tac-toe folded newspaper thing. He must be saving the mockingbird thing."

"What did he want to talk to you about?"

"You. Mozzie's worried about you . . . because of Mansfeld."

"Not that," Neal said with a groan. It was depressing to hear that Mozzie hadn't given up on that overworked issue by now. Why in the world had he bothered Peter with it?

"Yes, that. How'd he find out?"

"I don't know," Neal said, feeling inadequate to explain Mozzie's tenacity on the subject. "He told me he'd heard Klaus had been killed a couple of weeks after it happened. I don't think he knows where it happened."

"He doesn't," Peter reassured him. "But he warned me that the same 'Gestapo agents' as he called them are now trying to kill you."

"Seriously?" Neal stared at Peter with dismay. This was the reason for the subterfuge?

"I wish. Mozzie mustered the courage to tell me in order for me to put you under armed guard. He's convinced you believe you're being targeted."

"What proof does he have?"

"Let's see—you're not sleeping. You're avoiding him. You're never at June's. You sneak out of the mansion by scaling down the outside wall. And in Mozzie's conspiracy theorist brain, that all adds up to you attempting to shield him and June by never being around them. Any truth to that?"

"Hmm, he could have a point. Death and disaster do follow me wherever I go." Noting Peter's frown, "That's a joke, Peter."

"And a bad one. Have you been avoiding Mozzie?"

"Look, I've a full-time job and I'm studying for a dual master's to boot. I don't exactly have a lot of free time. Yes, it probably feels like when I'm not at work, I'm living at Columbia, but that's not because I'm trying to keep the Gestapo away." Neal paused to consider how best to explain it. "To be honest, it hasn't been easy to talk to Mozzie. He wants to discuss Klaus and speculate about what could have happened. I don't want to con him, but that's also the last thing I want to talk about. So
maybe he's right."

"Why are you sneaking out of the mansion so often?"

Neal dismissed the idea with a shrug. "It's a handy place to keep up my skill. June's place is more convenient than going to a rock wall."

"Sounds reasonable. Maybe you should explain that to Mozzie. You know I'm not his biggest fan, but even I must admit, he has his uses. And I know what good friends you are. Anything I can do to help?"

Peter looked genuinely sympathetic to his plight, but this was a mess Neal would have to handle on his own. "Thanks, but I got it. I'm sorry he bothered you about it. It'll all die down . . . eventually."

WCWCWCWCWCWCWC

An hour later and stuffed to the gills—the cheesecake was really not necessary, but Peter wasn't to be denied—Neal headed off with Peter for the Museum of Natural History, a short three blocks away.

"So what exhibits are we hitting, or do you want to cover the entire museum?" Neal asked. "As I recall it's open till past five, but even by sprinting through the exhibits I don't think we can see them all."

"We're heading for one exhibition—Celestial Spheres. I've wanted to see it all month but never found the time."

"I read about that," said Neal, relieved to hear he wasn't going to rush through the entire museum. "There's a manuscript by Galileo I'd love to see. It's a draft letter which describes his observations of the moons of Jupiter."

"That manuscript helped change our understanding of the universe, but it's not the only treasure on display. There's also a copy of Astronomicum Caesarum, or the King's Astronomer by Peter Apian."

"The book with the sumptuous woodcuts?" Neal hadn't heard that was also being exhibited. He'd seen a copy in Prague, and the brilliance of the illustrations had taken his breath away. They were like miniature stained glass windows.

"That's the one," said Peter, looking pleased at Neal's enthusiasm.

"Why is the exhibit called Celestial Spheres?"

"That was the ancient term used to describe planetary and stellar motion. It was first developed by Plato and Ptolemy and continued to be used right up through the Renaissance. The planets and stars were thought to be embedded in rotating spheres of ether."

This was a geeky side to Peter Neal had never witnessed. He expected him to be knowledgeable about criminal investigations, baseball, definitely about deviled ham, but astronomy and cosmology? Looking over at him, Neal wondered how many other hidden areas of expertise he had.

"What?" Peter asked.

"Nothing, I'm still getting used to Peter the Geek. I like it. Any other surprises up your sleeve?"
"There might be one or two," Peter acknowledged with a grin. "Better not get complacent."

They rounded the corner at Columbus Avenue and 81st Street and caught sight of the Rose Center for Earth and Space. The new addition to the museum sparkled like a crystal in the afternoon sun.

Neal paused to take in the view. "I never get tired of looking at it," he confessed to Peter. "When you walk by at night and see the glass cube illuminated in blue with the sphere floating inside, it's magical. Do you remember in *Men in Black* when the jewel on the cat's collar turns into a universe of galaxies and stars? That's what this reminds me of—a bit of the universe suspended in a crystal cube and somehow floating in Manhattan next to Central Park."

Peter smiled appreciatively. "You have the makings of a stargazer. At the heart that's what it's all about—magic. Come on, let's go inside."

As they entered the museum, Neal totaled up the day's revelations. He'd started what he expected to be a boringly routine day with copyright infringement to lull him to sleep, and instead wound up on a galactic adventure. After all the stress of the past few weeks, an afternoon off was such a gift. No demands, no insistent questions. Peter hadn't even dwelt on Mozzie's current obsession. For now Neal would press the *Pause* button on that, too.

"The *Celestial Spheres* exhibit is in the Special Exhibition Gallery in the main building but we have some time to explore the Rose Center first. Have you ever gone up the Cosmic Pathway?"

Peter asked.

"Nope, I must have been waiting to hitchhike a ride with my own personal guide to the galaxy. Lead on."

The Cosmic Pathway was a spiral that wound around the sphere from the top of the Big Bang Theater to the ground level. To reach it, Peter and Neal took the stairs to the top.

"Before descending the pathway, you need to take in the view from up here," urged Peter. "If you gaze down from this vantage point on the balcony, it's like you're suspended in space and looking down at the planets below you. Give it a try."

So much for pressing the *Pause* button. Had Peter somehow guessed about his newfound phobia? Fighting down the initial surge of panic, Neal willed himself to relax. The last thing he wanted was to have a flashback about Klaus falling to his death with Peter standing next to him. This was no big deal. Nothing like climbing down June's wall, and most nights he could do that without a hitch. The practice was paying off even if it did add fuel to the flames of Mozzie's suspicions.

"Floating in space—wouldn't want to miss out on that." Neal slapped on what he hoped was not too fake a smile and joined Peter on the balcony. Counting backwards from fifty—he found that the best way to ward off unwanted ghosts from his past—Neal gazed for what he assumed was a satisfactory length of time. "Spectacular view. Thanks, Peter," he said, stepping back, "but shouldn't we be getting to the exhibit?"

Peter looked like he wanted to say something, but just shook his head and followed him down the pathway.

Putting his hands in his pockets, Neal hoped he hadn't noticed his slight hand tremor. Fortunately Peter didn't bring it up. Instead he continued to talk about the exhibit.

"What's so fascinating about the exhibit are all the working models—a replica of the telescope built by Galileo, Apian wheels..."
"Apian wheels? You mean those woodcuts?"

"Yep, those woodcuts are actually paper slide charts or wheel charts—some call them the equivalent of paper computers. Apian wheels were used for astronomical calculations. I had a math professor at college who collected wheel charts and made working models of the ancient ones."

"How far back do they go?"

"The earliest one goes back to Hammurabi, eighteenth century BC. It's the pentagram that's the symbol of witchcraft. That symbol is actually the path of Venus over eight years."

Peter was now not just Peter the Geek, but Peter the Professor. It was easy to imagine him at a junior science fair with his telescopes and wheel charts, expounding on them to the judges.

The exhibit filled the entire gallery with large scale models of medieval and renaissance astronomical instruments and hands-on displays of wheel charts and astrolabes. It had already been running for a month, and there weren't many other visitors when Neal and Peter arrived.

Peter took off for the instruments while Neal took his time going through the ancient books and manuscripts on display. He started with the *Astronomicum Caesareum*. This copy had been lent by the Metropolitan Museum of Art and still had the seed pearls attached to string markers. The intricate wheels were fascinating and surprisingly complex. Wonder what Mozzie knew about them? The looked like they'd been designed with him in mind.

Neal wandered over to the Galileo manuscript. The letter was a draft but the handwriting was surprisingly legible. The drawings of Jupiter and its moons appeared at first to be simple doodles. There were scattered clusters of an asterisk within a circle grouped with four asterisk-like stars. The asterisks must be the moons with the circled one being Jupiter. Altogether there eleven groups. In each one, the positions of the moons to Jupiter was different.

As Neal examined the manuscript, suddenly he saw it, buried in the text at the end. At first he'd taken it to be the symbol for Jupiter, but no, that wasn't the usual symbol.

There was a display next to the manuscript with a large blown-up photograph of the manuscript along with a translation and explanation of the symbols. Neal studied it, then went back to the manuscript in the case. There was no doubt.

"What is it?" said Peter, walking up. "Trying to figure out how Galileo drew the moons?"

"More than that, Peter, look at this. At the bottom of the manuscript, fifth line from the bottom. What do you see?"

Peter peered at it. "You talking about the symbol for Jupiter?"

"Look closer. Are you sure that's the symbol?"

Peter narrowed his eyes as he studied it and his expression grew more serious, "That's not . . . ?"

"I think it is. It's a glowing branch, the symbol the cybercriminal is using."

"You mean he adopted one of Galileo's symbols for his signature?"

"No, I examined the display. The photo of the document in the display uses the standard symbol for Jupiter. It's not the same as the one on this manuscript. Either the manuscript's been tampered with or it's a forgery." Turning to Peter, Neal added, "Looks like we found our new case."
Notes: I used to live in New York City and enjoy writing about my old stomping grounds. The American Museum of Natural History was one of my favorite places—I hope you don't mind that Peter and I got a bit geeky in this chapter. In the next chapter which I'll post on Saturday, the investigation into the manuscript gets underway with a few distractions thrown into the mix, including Sara, who is back in town.

Find pins of the Galileo manuscript, Apian wheels, and the Rose Center for Earth and Space with its dizzying Cosmic Way on The Woman in Blue board at our Caffrey Conversation Pinterest site.

Thanks to my fantastic beta reader and muse Penna Nomen for her many excellent suggestions and thanks to you for reading!

Once museum personnel had been notified of the tampered manuscript, the exhibit was closed to the public and FBI agents armed with forensic kits took the place of visitors to the hall. All the other books and manuscripts on display would now need to be examined and the entire exhibit swept for evidence.

Jones walked over to Neal as he was verifying the security mechanisms on the display cases. "Care to fill me in? How did you and Peter know a theft had occurred here? Did somebody tip you off?"

"Not me," Neal replied with a laugh. "This was Peter's idea to come here. Must have been his famous gut at work." Neal's cell phone buzzed. Glancing at the display, he excused himself and walked over to the side of the hall. "Hi, Sara. This is a welcome surprise."

"Glad I caught you. Am I pulling you out of some deadly dull mortgage fraud case?"

"Nothing that mundane. Hot on the trail of a stolen Galileo manuscript."

"I won't keep you from your thrills then. I'm in New York. Are you free for lunch tomorrow? We could meet at the Bangkok Inn. I saw several other dishes on their menu I'd like to try."

Neal was happy to take her up on her suggestion. This day was getting better and better. Hopefully Sara would stay around longer than last time and they could go out on a proper date. Perhaps dinner at La Palette. Sara was intriguing. Smart, tough, gorgeous with an elegant style, passionate about her job, she—

"Neal, we could use your help over here," Peter called out. He was standing with Diana in front of the Peter Apian display.

Casting daydreams aside, Neal said, "At your service."

Two hours later and a preliminary review of the manuscripts and books on display concluded, the only item that apparently had been tampered with was the Galileo manuscript.

Peter and Neal joined the exhibition curator, Lars Hovland, in his office on the third floor to brief him on the investigation. When they walked in, it was plain that Peter would have a tough time keeping his focus in an office filled with nautical instruments, brass sextants, astrolabes, and a wide assortment of other ancient devices. Restricting himself to a brief longing glance at the display, Peter sat down in the chair opposite Hovland's desk.

The distressed curator jotted down notes as he listened to Peter's report. "This is the first scandal I've had to deal with since coming to the museum," he confessed. "What happens next?"

"One of our highest priorities will be to narrow the time window for when the tampering occurred," Peter said. "We know that the photograph on the display board is of the original manuscript. Do you have a record of when the display board was prepared?"

"We photographed the manuscript ourselves and had the board made a week before the exhibition opened." Pulling up the records on his computer, Hovland added, "The manuscript was photographed on the fifth of September."
"That gives us a preliminary reference point," Peter said as he made a note. "Had any photographs been taken of it once it was placed in the display case?"

"Yes, once the objects are in the cases, we take documentary photographs of all of them." Hovland turned to his computer and searched the database for the photo of the manuscript. Displaying it on his monitor, he zoomed in to magnify the symbol of Jupiter at the end of the text. It was grainy but the symbol could be identified as the original.

"I don't understand it," he said worriedly as he made a futile attempt to smooth down his shock of ice-blond hair. "This photo was taken on the tenth of September and the exhibit was opened to the public on the twelfth. We have very sophisticated sensors on the display cases, and none of them has been triggered since the exhibit opened. There hasn't even been a false alarm."

Peter looked over at Neal and gave him a slight nod. The theft was a striking parallel to the one at the Brooklyn Museum they had just investigated. "We'll need to access your security records. I'll send agents by tomorrow to interview your security people."

"Of course, anything we can do to help. . . ."

As they walked back to the exhibit, Neal said, "So far everything is matching the pattern for our 'Mr. Glowing Branch.' It's as if he's taunting us."

"Well, if he was, he picked the wrong people," Peter said. "He's becoming too brazen. That will ultimately lead to his downfall."

It was nearly six o'clock by the time the agents had finished their work at the exhibit. The manuscript had been taken back to the Bureau. Experts would be called in to verify the other works. Peter put Jones in charge of reviewing the museum's security procedures.

Turning to Neal he added, "Work with the forensic team to see what you can find out about the manuscript in the lab."

"Do you want me to start on it now?"

"No, it's late. You have classes to go to this evening. I can drop you off at Columbia on my way home."

As they walked back to the car Peter said, "You realize, this wasn't quite what I had in mind for comp time."

"I somehow suspected that you hadn't staged this as an elaborate surprise for my benefit. Jones asked how we'd known a theft had occurred."

"It's a bizarre coincidence. If you hadn't noticed the symbol, who knows how long it would have been before the forgery was discovered."

"It probably would have gone undetected for a long time. There would have been no reason to check it. The manuscript is valuable but is worth more for its historical significance than its monetary value. I can't figure out why it was targeted."

"There may be some connection to Mr. Glowing Branch that will become apparent, but for the moment it's another mystery to be deciphered," Peter agreed.

When they walked past Leo's Deli, Peter asked, "Do you mind if we make a quick stop? El's been busy all week preparing for an art gallery opening on Friday and will appreciate not having to
cook. Leo makes a great matzoh ball soup that's her favorite."

"No problem," Neal said, looking at his watch. "If you drop me off, I'll have plenty of time before
the evening session. By the way, I talked with Noelle. She's arriving Saturday for Columbia's
Family Day."

"We could meet you for dinner on Saturday?"

"I asked about that, and she's already booked. Has a date with your brother, and, funny thing, didn't
ask me to join them."

"Romance is in the air!" Peter said with a laugh. "I'd love to be a fly on the wall for that. I never
thought of Joe as being the romantic type. Of course, I never experienced the thrill of dating him. .
. ."

"He must be better than you think. I gather they've been seeing each other ever since they first met.
That has to be going on seven months now. Does Joe ever mention anything about Noelle to you?"

"Not to me. Maybe El? I expect she'll cajole more out of him over Thanksgiving. El's an expert at
the fine art of wheedling. Joe won't stand a chance."

**Watson Hall. Columbia University. October 20, 2004. Wednesday evening.**

Tonight's class wasn't an art history seminar, but something much more intense—a group critique
of his own art where one of the professors and a small group of students visited each of the student
studios in turn to discuss their works in progress. This was the second session Neal had experienced
in the Visual Arts program. For the first one which had been held two weeks ago, he'd gone in
feeling reasonably confident and left a dejected lump of self-doubt. His comrades in this torture
exercise were Richard and Keiko, both of whom had studios close to his. They had bonded in
misery.

This week's inquisitor was Myra Stockman, a dynamic and challenging African American artist
from Charleston, South Carolina. Although quite young, she already had added several one-woman
shows at prestigious museums to her resume. Neal felt himself very fortunate to have her for his
group and also intimidated. Her works were known for her exploration of race, gender, and
sensuality. He was positive she was going to challenge him to explore new directions in his own
work. He wished he knew what those directions were.

The group critique lasted two hours, and afterwards he joined Richard and Keiko in the lounge at
Watson Hall as they licked their wounds.

Flopped on a sectional, Keiko let out a soft moan. "I feel like I might as well give up. She didn't
like a single one of my ideas. I'm such a failure. I'll just focus on my job at the bank and pursue my
dream of being a finance officer. Someone, kill me now," she added, burying her face in a cushion.

"My critique wasn't much better," Neal pointed out. "I especially appreciated it when she took one
of my sketches, hung it upside down, and declared it made much more sense that way."

"Yes, but she raved about that other piece of yours," Keiko pointed out as she lifted her head off
the cushion and used it for a chin rest. "What do you call it? Exposed? She didn't call any of my
works 'soul-baring.' "

"I was talking with a second year student yesterday," Richard said. "He warned me that she does
that deliberately to all first year students. The idea is to shake you out of all your preconceived
notions. She calls it mind-building and expansive."
"I call it Armageddon," retorted Keiko. "If her purpose was to leave blasted landscapes in her wake, she succeeded."

"I wonder if she'll be there on Family Day Sunday?" Neal said. "That would be entertaining. She could terrify all the parents. My aunt is coming to the event. Her brother called her Armageddon when she was a child. The two of them could wage war together."

"What about your parents? Are they coming too?" Keiko asked.

"No," said Neal, "but two close friends are also coming so I'll be well represented. How about your folks, Keiko?"

"My father will be there. Richard, will you have anyone there?"

"It's too long a trip for my mom," Richard said. "Coming from New Orleans for one day doesn't make much sense."

"You could show up anyway," suggested Keiko. "Hang out with us, or—I know—play your guitar during the reception. You could be our wandering minstrel."

"You're the one who should play, Keiko. Fiona told me you play violin so well, she insisted you join our fledgling band."

"I couldn't believe she asked me. I've only played classical music up to now."

"I'm not," said Neal. "Fiona has this grand idea that we'll be able to fuse her Celtic with my rock, Richard's jazz, your classical, and whoever else she can recruit and the result will be something transcendental. Or we'll blow up. There's a comforting thought—think how inspiring that will be for your art."

"Are we still on to rehearse on Sunday?" asked Keiko.

"Yep, ear plugs optional but highly recommended. Aidan was able to reserve us a room in Prentis Hall. He has privileges there since he's taking a course in computer music. He only made one condition: that we have to allow him to join us on synthesizer."

"Has anyone even heard him?" Richard asked. "It's not that I'm not grateful for him finding us a room, but I'd like to be prepared."

"I've only fenced with him," Neal admitted, "but he mentioned experimenting with sound effects for his videos. Hence the ear plug recommendation."

Keiko extricated herself from the nest of cushions she'd made. "Work day tomorrow."

As Neal and Richard walked down the corridor to their studios, Richard said, "Sorry to hear your parents won't be attending. I was looking forward to meeting them."

"About that—I didn't want to get into a long explanation with Keiko, but I'm estranged from them. Never see them. It's been like this for a long time, so I'm used to it." Neal knew Richard well enough to know he wouldn't pursue the issue, and it was a relief to be up front about it.

"I'd wondered," Richard said. "In all our late night bull sessions, you've never mentioned them. You've talked about your cousin Henry, your aunt, even your grandparents, but not them. I'm sorry—I know what it's like. When I came out three years ago, my parents pretty much disowned me. Since then, I've patched things up with my mom, but I don't think my dad will ever accept who I
am. It sucks, but I've learned to live with it. You ever want to talk about it, let me know."

"That must have been excruciating for you." Neal looked at his friend with sympathy. "I admire your courage. You know who you are and are honest about it even when you may suffer because of it. I keep reinventing myself every year. I'm still not sure who the real me is."

Richard clapped him on the shoulder. "Don't worry. Stockman will drag it out of you no matter what."

As Neal cleaned up his studio, he paused in front of the work Stockman had admired. Not so much soul-baring as soul-wrenching, it was the work he'd started the night Klaus had died. Stockman said it had an honesty most of his other works didn't. If that was honesty, was he ready to handle the implications?

Honesty was, after all, not a prized attribute for the con artist. He'd spent most of his life hiding from who he was, not embracing it.

Neal sat down at his worktable and pulled out a large sheet of drawing paper and started sketching.

His first sketch was of Mozzie. Strange but he'd never drawn him before. As he filled in his features—his bald head, his raised eyebrows as he peered over his glasses—he couldn't help but chuckle. He still couldn't fathom how Mozzie had worked up sufficient courage to meet with Peter on his own. Why was Neal so reluctant to meet with him? Was he trying to hide what had happened with Klaus from Mozzie or from himself?

Crumpling up that sheet of paper, Neal started on a fresh sheet. As he drew, he thought about what Richard must have gone through when his father rejected him. What was it with fathers? Henry's dad had tried to kill both his own son and Neal. Neal's own dad, well, at least he hadn't tried to kill him, but he'd killed another man. Maybe he just hadn't gotten around to Neal . . . It made him feel incredibly lucky to have Peter for an honorary father figure. But it might be safer to view him more like the uncle he would be if Noelle married Joe—the occasionally wiser, sometimes annoyingly bossy, but always dependable uncle. Avoid the father curse.

He looked down at the sketch he'd just made of Peter. *Could be less pressure on both of us, or are you the one who'll shatter that curse to smithereens?*

**White Collar Division. October 21, 2004. Thursday morning.**

On Thursday morning, Neal arrived at work early. He'd woken up during the night thinking about the glowing branch symbol. He couldn't shake off the feeling there was some subliminal message hidden within the manuscript.

Last week Travis had mentioned to him that he'd acquired a new camera for the lab. This manuscript would be a good test of its capability. Retrieving the manuscript from the Evidence Control Unit, Neal headed for the lab where he found Travis already at work.

"Is this what caused all the excitement yesterday?" Travis asked, swiveling to face him. "I figured you'd come calling."

"How about putting that new camera of yours through its paces?"

While Travis prepared the camera, Neal readied the spectral equipment for an analysis of the paper. He'd been working with Travis over the past month to improve the art authentication resources available at the lab and they were now able to perform many of the tests that formerly required the services of an outside lab.
The spectral analysis confirmed that the manuscript was indeed a forgery. If the paper had been produced in the sixteenth century, it would have been composed mainly of bast fiber. Instead the paper used for the manuscript in the exhibit was composed of cotton linter which was unheard of in Galileo's day.

With that question answered, Neal settled in to work on the 8GB digital image Travis had obtained. Sitting in front of a 42-inch monitor, he overlaid photographs of the original Galileo with the forgery. The text was identical in each. To have a perfect match it must have been a digital copy, but the drawings. . . .

"What do you see?"

Neal gave a start when he heard Peter's voice came from behind his shoulder. He'd been so focused on the monitor, he hadn't heard him approach. Turning his head, he saw Peter also staring with rapt attention at the images on the computer.

"Look at this. The two texts are identical. I can overlay one of top of the other and they align flawlessly. The only way that could have been achieved is by digitally printing the manuscript. You agree?"

"Yes, but the drawings—"

"Precisely! That's what makes this so fascinating. The alignment of the moons in each drawing is off, not by much, but when you compare it with the original, it's noticeable. It had to be deliberate. Anyone who achieves the precise rendering of the text would have had no difficulty with the drawings. The question is what does it mean?"

Peter's eyes glittered. "You think this is a code, some sort of hidden message?"

"I don't know why else it would have been done. There has to be a significance to the way the moons were offset. But figuring out what that it is …" He spread his hands helplessly, confessing. "I'm stumped."

Peter moved a chair over and sat down next to Neal. "The offset could be used be indicate certain words in the text. If we overlay the forgery and rotate it, and then extract the letter combinations. . . ." Peter moved the keyboard in front of him and began manipulating the images. Pulling out a pad of paper, he made rapid notes.

Neal moved his chair out of the way and watched him work for a few minutes. Peter seemed to have forgotten he was even present. No surprise there. Peter was the master puzzle-solver, with the Puzzlethon trophies to prove it. Neal had counted at least four in his study.

"Peter?"

"Hmm?"

"Do you mind if I take off for lunch?"

Peter's eyes didn't leave the monitor as he said, "I don't want to shove you out. There's room for both of us to work."

"I've been staring at this for hours. I could use a break. Besides, I have a lunch date." Neal didn't bother to mask his delight in seeing Sara again.

That brought a reaction. Peter shot him a quick glance. "Who's the lucky girl?"

"Sara's back in town."

"Head off, Romeo. I know better than to keep you from that appointment. I'll probably be right here when you get back and no closer to a solution. I have meetings this afternoon. You can take over then."


"So I'd no sooner gotten back, then they sent me off to London. I flew there Saturday and plan to return next Monday. It's been a whirlwind." Sara reclined back in her chair as the waitress cleared away the remnants of her shrimp curry. "But I've been doing all the talking. How about you? What trouble have you gotten into during the week I was gone?"

Neal refilled their cups with jasmine tea. He'd much rather think about Sara right now than his own activities. She was wearing an emerald silk sheath dress that set off her hair beautifully. The jewel tones resembled a medieval manuscript. He could see her as the model for one of Rossetti's Pre-Raphaelite masterpieces. Perhaps Sara could be Neal's Alexa Wilding. The red hair—

"What have you been up to, Caffrey?" Sara repeated.

"Nothing much. Recovered a stolen Roman sword at N-Con. You missed me as Mark Antony, by the way. Infiltrated a gladiator arena to rescue fellow agents from certain death. We have a forged Galileo manuscript on our hands now."

"Really?" Sara asked, looking as if she wasn't sure she should believe him or not. "Not too shabby for a junior almost-agent. I recovered a vintage Lamborghini last week. Undoubtedly worth much more than your Roman toothpick."

"I suspect you're right," Neal said, opting out of their usual game of one-upmanship. He had something more serious in mind. "We should celebrate your success. Any chance of going out on a date sometime?"

"We're doing lunch now." Sara tossed back with a smile. "Doesn't this count?"

"No, it doesn't. I mean a proper date, in the evening, when we don't have to go back to work in an hour."

"I'm sorry. I'm leaving this afternoon." Sara paused, biting her lip. "I wish I'd known . . . I didn't mean . . . Neal, my situation's changed."

"How so?" Reading people's emotions was one of his strengths, and the signals he'd been receiving from Sara throughout lunch were not what he'd been hoping for. He had a bad feeling about where this was heading.

"You remember Bryan McKenzie?"

"Sighin' Bryan? How could I forget?"

She winced. "Please don't call him that."

"Well, you could stop sighing over him."

"Neal, listen to me. He's being transferred to London."

"I'm starting to like this conversation." Had he misread her?
"Please, don't." Sara's expression grew even more serious. "He wants me to go too. He's already spoken to the London office. When I was in London, I finalized my plans. I'll start there next month."

"Oh." So that's why Sara had wanted to see him. It was to say goodbye.

"God, I'm sorry. I should have told you as soon as I found out. I didn't realize you were interested in us . . . you know. It's not just the move. Bryan and I are . . . well, we're dating."

"Isn't there a policy at Sterling-Bosch against that?"

"Don't go medieval on me. We can still be friends, right?"

"Sure. Friends."

WCWCWCWCWCWCWCWC

Friends, right. Definitely not the way he had planned lunch to go. Neal took his time walking back to the Federal Building. He'd already been deep into planning the perfect evening date and now that pipe dream was fizzling away in front of him. It was his own fault. He'd been too complacent over the summer, enjoying their friendship, not wanting to risk anything more when memories of Kate were so fresh, and now it was too late.

Neal detoured through Thomas Paine Park. Fallen oak leaves were thick on the paths and he aimlessly kicked them aside as he walked.

Still, what if she had said yes to a date? Long-distance relationships were difficult to maintain. That had been a problem with Kate. They never seemed to be together long enough to sort through their differences. And realistically how could he compete long-distance with Sighin' Bryan, with all his ju-jitsu, playboy, man-of-the-world macho-ness? How much older than Sara was Bryan anyway?

So, friends it would be. He could do this. Given that they would be separated by an ocean, not much choice in the matter.

Notes: I've added a pin of Alexa Wilding, the Rossetti model which reminds Neal of Sara, to The Woman in Blue board at our Caffrey Conversation Pinterest site at www.pinterest.com/caffreycon.

Peter's status as an honorary father figure and how that relates to the father curse he's experienced in the past is a thorny subject for Neal and something that he is also wrestling with in Caffrey Disclosure now being posted by my wonderful beta-reader Penna Nomen.

In Chapter 18: The Glowing Branch, Neal and Peter call on an expert for help as they try to break the secret code contained in the manuscript.
Neal stopped off at his favorite coffee bar on his way back to the office from lunch. The FBI blend wouldn't be adequate for the long afternoon of monitor-staring he was confronting. While there, he picked up a large macchiato and cheese panini for Peter, to assuage the pangs of guilt for having left him to work on the manuscript by himself.

He found Peter still in the lab. The pad of paper next to him was covered with Peter's scrawls. "Sorry I was gone so long. Figured you could use this." Neal took a seat and handed him the bag. "Any breakthroughs?" he asked hopefully.

"No eureka moments," Peter said, sniffing the panini appreciatively, "but it's a fascinating puzzle. I wound up brown-bagging it in front of the monitor and accumulated a long—make that extremely long—list of methods to be explored, any of which potentially could provide a solution." Taking the lid off his coffee, he asked, "How was lunch?"

"Could've gone better," Neal admitted ruefully. "Turned out to be a Bon Voyage lunch. She's moving to London."

"Ouch. That hurts," Peter said sympathetically.

"Not only that. I've been relegated to the dreaded friend zone. Guess there's nothing left for me but to bury myself in my work." Neal reached over for Peter's notes.

"That's the spirit," Peter encouraged. "Best antidote to a kiss-off. Immerse yourself in the manuscript. Zero distractions."

"Yeah, right." Neal was disinclined to rise to Peter's level of enthusiasm. "I'll spend the rest of the day on this. Tomorrow morning, I'm scheduled to meet at the museum with an expert from the Met who was called in to verify the books in the exhibit."

Four hours later and what was there to show from it? Besides a massive case of eyestrain, sore neck, and a brain groggy from pondering millimeter discrepancies, not much else. Neal rubbed his temples wearily. There didn't appear to be any discernible pattern to the alignment shifts. But he was convinced more than ever that something was there. It would be too perverse for there to be no meaning to the moon displacement. Unless . . . was Mr. Glowing Branch deliberately setting out to drive him insane?

It was not an encouraging sign that he was reduced to hoping inspiration would somehow drift in on gossamer wings during the night while he slept. The odds were much higher he would have nightmares of being suffocated by a forest of menacing glowing tree branches.

Peter came into the lab late in the day. Everyone else had left. Neal had leaned back in his chair and was contemplating gloomily the image of the manuscript on the monitor. Peter sat down next to him. "I can tell from the dark cloud hanging over you that you didn't make much progress either."

"Got that right," Neal said, stifling a yawn. "I've done all I can do."
"You know, there's one avenue we haven't pursued," Peter said thoughtfully.

"I'm open to anything."

"How about bringing in a heavy hitter? You told me Mozzie loves puzzles. Perhaps this will strike a resonant chord somewhere in the recesses of his paranoiac brain."

"You don't mind involving him in a FBI case?" Mozzie was the ideal candidate to help and Neal could guarantee he wouldn't be able to resist a puzzle like this. Plus, solving it would be so difficult, he would no doubt abandon his Mansfeld obsession in favor of this more stimulating challenge.

"Nah. It's not like we're handing over any FBI secrets," Peter said, dismissing Neal's hesitancy. "And face it, he's much more likely to understand how our cybercriminal thinks than we are."

"I could meet with him tomorrow," Neal suggested. Normally he saw Mozzie at night, but if they met in broad daylight Mozzie might be less inclined to indulge in Gestapo conspiracies.

"Good idea. Okay if I join you? My presence could help keep Mozzie from wandering off the rails. In any case, I'll be so curious to know what he may discover that I won't get any work done here."

"Three brilliant intellects working together? Our cybercriminal won't know what hit him." Neal was relieved to hear Peter's offer. In the meantime, this day was a wrap. Neal closed his programs, preparing to shut down the computer.

"Before you leave, El called. What time do you want us to show up for Family Day?"

"The events start with a welcome reception at the Art Gallery at Schermerhorn Hall at noon. That will be the best place to meet. I know you're familiar with how to get there. Here's a suggestion—you may wish to wear something more conservative than what you wore last time." Peter's last visit to Columbia had been on the day that Klaus had been killed almost four weeks ago.

"No worries on that score," said Peter with a groan. "That Grateful Dead disguise will never see the light of day again."

"Was that what you were going for? Sure looked like a Wookiee to me. On the plus side, I can vouch with certainty that no one who saw you will recognize you. Your Professor Burkowski disguise, however, was not so radical a transformation. How do you want to handle it if they ask? Cousin?"

"That works."

"That works." Peter picked up the pad of paper which now contained Neal's own drawings and notes in addition to his own and skimmed through them. "Are you planning to see Noelle before Sunday?"

"No, remember she's busy on Saturday night."

Peter put down the paper and looking around the lab, stroked his chin. "She'll probably be in town for a few days. This would be a great opportunity to talk to her about Mansfeld."

Neal glared at him. "No, it wouldn't and I don't intend to. Peter, promise me you won't say anything to her."

Peter held up a hand, "I won't, but I don't understand why you're so reluctant."

"There's no need to get her involved," Neal insisted. "She helped me with get over the child abuse
experience, and I'm very grateful. But that's done now. I'm fine. Can we just give it a rest, please? It's bad enough having Mozzie on my case."

"Message transmitted loud and clear."

**Schermerton Hall, Columbia University. October 21, 2004. Thursday evening.**

Neal arrived at Columbia with time to spare. His seminar on eighteenth dynastic Egyptian art was that evening and the professor, Martine Giron, was a stickler for no beverages in class. As a result no one arrived at the seminar room early, and the students' lounge had become the de facto assembling point. When Neal entered the lounge, he spotted Fiona working at her laptop in one of the niches.

"Just the person I was hoping to see," Fiona said as she made room for him on the sectional. "I've been researching names for the band and have several I'd like your opinion on. I've prepared a spreadsheet. As you can see, it's sorted by language and I've been filling in notes on name derivation and associated connotations."

Fiona's list included over forty rows of names with several columns of color-coded notes on each one. "Are you familiar with the concept of overkill? I can just imagine what your papers must be like—twenty pages of footnotes for each page of text."

"Clearly, you don't understand the weighty significance a name has," she said, standing her ground. "No telling where this band might go. A few months from now we could be giving a concert and I'd be in agony, having learned the name we chose means something gross in Finnish."

"The horror!" Neal said with a laugh. "All right, let me look it over—anything to prevent that dire prediction from becoming reality."

Michael entered the lounge and joined them on the sectional. He peered curiously at Fiona's spreadsheet. "What are you two plotting?"

"Nothing sinister," Neal said. "Fiona's starting a band."

"What kind of band?"

Neal gestured toward Fiona. "Take it away, Fiona. It's your baby."

"Celtic metal is the closest fit. Celtic, Scandinavian, goth metal, jazz, classical, new-age. We're going to fuse it all together in one big bang and see what we come up with."

"There's your name—Big Bang," Neal interjected.

Fiona made a note on her spreadsheet. "That could work. How about Téagartha? That's Irish for big, and the way we're growing, we're going to be very big, or perhaps Torann for noise."

Michael had been listening intently to their discussion and at the end declared, "I want in."

That was a surprise. Michael had never mentioned to Neal he played an instrument. Fiona must have had the same reaction. "What do you play?" she asked.

"Nothing," he admitted, but I'd like to learn. There must be something I can play. If you're looking for a big noise, I'm your man."

Michael was looking so hopeful, Neal found it impossible to dash his dream. "There's tambourine,"
he suggested. "I don't think we have anyone on tambourine yet. Of course, you'd have to sign up for a rigorous training schedule, long hours of practice. It might interfere with your rowing."

"That's okay. Winter's on its way and New York's too cold to row in winter. When's our first session?"

"This Sunday, 8 p.m. in Prentis Hall," Fiona said. "Can you make it?"

"Count me in," Michael said enthusiastically. "Now, any ideas on where to shop for a tambourine?"

**Neal's loft. October 22, 2004. Friday afternoon.**

"C'mon in—the door's open." Neal continued to spread out papers on the table as Peter walked in.

"Mozzie not here yet"

"No, he's probably skulking outside checking for assassins. You didn't see any ominous characters I assume when you arrived?"

"No. Would it have made him less anxious if I'd brought along my assault rifle?"

"That probably would have sent him totally off the deep end. He's already offered to install a state-of-the-art monitoring system for June's house and the loft. I talked with June—we're going to let him go ahead. It will ease his concerns, and perhaps give us a little more peace. Turns out he's been calling her at odd hours of the day and night, 'just to check in,' so she's willing to try anything. It may be a lost cause though."

"How'd your morning at the museum go?" Peter asked.

"Nowhere. I talked with the Metropolitan expert who was examining Peter Apian's work. He couldn't find any sign that it had been tampered with. By the way, I took advantage to the lab's new equipment to make copies of all sixty-two pages in Apian's book. These are blown-up versions of the eighteen woodcuts of wheels in the book plus detailed instructions on how to use them. I thought—"

A soft padding of footsteps on the stairs alerted Neal of Mozzie's approach. Looking up, he saw the man of the hour peering around the door. "Thanks for coming, Mozzie. It's safe to enter. I've already checked for bugs."

"You really should let me go ahead and install the new system, Neal. I'll charge the family rate with easy installments."

"I've discussed it with June and she's given her blessing to proceed."

"Excellent." He walked over to Neal's wine rack and helped himself to a bottle. As he opened it, he said, "Suit, I hear you need my assistance. As a favor to Neal, I am willing to impart some of my wisdom. We can discuss my fee at a later time."

Raising a brow, Peter looked over at Neal, who shrugged acknowledgment. "He doesn't work for free."

"Neal explained the basics on the phone. What have you prepared?" Mozzie asked as he sat down at the table and started examining the papers.

"This is a copy of the Galileo manuscript." Neal said, handing him the scanned image, "and I also
made copies of the pages of Apian's work, *The Emperor's Astronomy* or *Astronomicum Caesareum* if you prefer the original Latin title."

"Of course. And you should refer to him by his Latin name, Petrus Apianus. By the way, did you know that he Latinized his name from Bienewitz, derived from *Biene*, meaning bee in German?"

Mozzie paused and added cheerfully, "We should conduct the proceedings in Latin. Working in the tongue of Cicero will be a refreshing change. Anyone object?"

Peter hastily jumped in. "That's a big yes."

"Oh, very well," Mozzie grumbled, "but I'll be operating at a significant handicap."

"I'll make due note of your sacrifice in my report," Peter assured him solemnly.

Mozzie started going through the papers on the table. "I visited the exhibit at the Natural History Museum when it first opened. I wish I'd studied the Galileo in more detail then." He stopped to scrutinize one sheet. "What's this? How did the Elder Sign wind up here?" and he held up Neal's original drawing of the glowing branch. "I don't remember the Cthulhu Mythos being part of the exhibit."

Neal and Peter exchanged startled looks. "Cthulhu Mythos?" said Peter. "Are you talking about Lovecraft?"

"'On the edge of the world; peering over the rim into a fathomless chaos of eternal night. Shreiking, slithering, torrential shadows of red viscous madness chasing one another through endless, ensanguinated condors of purple fulgurous sky . . . formless phantasms and kalaidoscopic mutations of a ghoulsh, remembered scene.' The one and only H.P. Lovecraft, master of horror and the macabre. The universe of the Cthulhu Mythos and its associated cosmic horrors holds a great appeal to me. The question is why does it to you?" Mozzie peered at them over his glasses.

Neal dredged up what little he knew about Lovecraft from his memory. "I read some of his works as a teenager. Inspired some really freakish nightmares as I recall."

"I was addicted to sci-fi as a boy," Peter said. "I think I read all of Lovecraft's books growing up. *At the Mountains of Madness*, the Great Old Ones—that's powerful stuff, but I don't see what any of this has to do with this case."

"You don't recognize this symbol then. This is a duplicate of the symbol Lovecraft used for the Elder Ones. Neal, you should be able to find it on the web." Rubbing his hands with glee, Mozzie added, "This is going to be the most fun I've had since deciphering Pribilof's algorithm. I need more wine."

"Found it," said Neal excitedly and displayed an image on the computer. "Black background, glowing five-pronged branch. It's an exact match for the symbol. Mozzie, the FBI first discovered this symbol on a decryption program being used to override a museum's security system. It was also embedded in the program the hacker used to override the Brooklyn Museum's security. Wednesday we found it on the Galileo manuscript."

"Fascinating—let me see the manuscript." Mozzie studied Neal's scanned copy of the forgery.

"So, what does this mean?" Peter asked, his brow furrowing. "It could be a coincidence or simply that the hacker likes Lovecraft."

"The hacker is American?" Neal suggested.
"Not necessarily," said Mozzie. "Lovecraft's works were more revered in France than in the United States when they were first published, and the Cthulhu Mythos has inspired secret societies across the globe—Japan, Argentina, Germany, to name a few. Your hacker, I shall dub him Azathoth, could be a member or a leader of a secret society. Oh, I'm liking this more and more."

"Azathoth, you really want to go there?" Neal challenged.

"Why not? Lovecraft describes him as: 'The boundless daemon sultan Azathoth, whose name no lips dare speak aloud, and who gnaws hungrily in inconceivable, unlighted chambers beyond time and space amidst the muffled, maddening beating of vile drums and the thin monotonous whine of accursed flutes.' Very apt for a hacker."

"I agree," said Peter unexpectedly. "What do we know about this hacker, this Azathoth? We know he's a highly skilled computer programmer. We know he engages in cybercrimes, so he flaunts the laws and considers himself above them. He most likely has a super-inflated ego. He's using the Elder Sign as a symbol for something."

"We may know something else," said Neal. "He could be taunting us. He didn't content himself with stealing the manuscript. He's using it to send someone a message. It could be to some other criminal, but why go to that extreme? This may be a gauntlet he's tossed down."

"Challenging us to a duel of wits? I suppose it's possible," Peter said dubiously.

Mozzie continued to examine the papers on the table. "You've made copies of the Galileo manuscript and the Astronomicum Caesarum, I see."

Neal nodded. "This page is the original, this one the forgery, and this image overlays the forgery on top of the original," Neal said.

"Fascinating—the moon positions are not the same."

"Precisely."

"What about the Astronomicum? Any changes to it?"

"Not that we can find," Neal replied. "I met with an expert today and he believes the book was not tampered with."

"Mozzie, if you were Azathoth, why would you have altered the moon positions?" Peter asked.

"To leave a secret message, obviously, a message that could only be decrypted by an extremely devious and convoluted method." Looking around at the papers on the table, Mozzie exclaimed, "Of course! We're meant to solve it with an Apian wheel!"

"Seriously, Mozz?" asked Neal, dismayed at his gigantic non sequitur.

"He could have a point," Peter said. "Some consider these wheels to be early paper computers. Wouldn't a cyberhacker be intrigued by them? Perhaps enough to use one?"

"But how would you go about deciding which one and how to use it?" Neal asked. "There are eighteen different wheels in Apian's book."

"Probably we should start by building the wheels," Peter speculated. "Apian's book has detailed directions on how to assemble them and make calculations. Granted the descriptions are in Latin and difficult to decipher. Building the models and then discovering the correct one to use would
take a genius. Gee, I wonder do we know anyone brilliant enough to take on Azathoth?"

"Suit, I believe you do. And may I say, I've never been as impressed by your perspicacity as I am now," said Mozzie, positively glowing with the prospect awaiting him. "I'll begin my list of needed supplies immediately."

Neal took Peter aside. "Any chance I'll be able to expense the amount of wine this will require?"

"We have several cases of confiscated wine in our storeroom," Peter said under his breath. "I'll talk to Hughes about appropriating one for the cause. Sounds like you'll have a roommate for several days. You okay with that?"

"Wasn't I just saying all he needed with something new to fixate on? I believe the cure has already started." Neal looked over affectionately at Mozzie who was muttering to himself in Latin as he sorted through the pages of the Astronomicum and added, "How's your Latin?"

"Lapsed, but it may be sufficient to understand the directions."

Mozzie looked up from the table, "Neal I need more copies of the woodcuts, heaviest paper you got. Oh, and do you have any prosciutto crudo? I find that very conducive to the brain process. Also a plate of antipasto. No cheese, remember, Lactose intolerant, Suit. How's your stock on Italian wines? Valpolicella or Barbaresco will do, but I must have Italian wines in order to work in Latin."

Peter rolled his eyes and looked at Neal with sympathy.

With a heavy sigh, Neal got up and put on his jacket, muttering to Peter as he left for shopping, "Business expense."


Elizabeth breathed a sigh of relief when she pulled into a parking space close to the Ellington mansion. Finding a space on Saturday was not normally a chore, but Riverside Drive was always popular. She glanced over with satisfaction at the food containers on the passenger seat. Neal would be pleasantly surprised. It was 11:30 a.m. She knew he had a morning class, but he should be back soon.

She'd hoped there would be food left over from the event at the gallery last night, but everything was so delicious, she was worried that might not be the case. Neal had introduced her to Jacques, the owner and chef at La Palette, and this had been her first opportunity to use him at one of her events. Jacques had been a triumph. The prices he charged her were so reasonable, she wondered if she'd been put on his family plan.

Establishing contacts with all the tradespeople she needed to deal with for her new business had been one of El's greatest challenges. A few weeks ago, Neal had arranged a lunch meeting for her to go over her catering proposal with Jacques and had deftly steered the conversation so that before she knew it she was chatting with Jacques like an old friend.

Elizabeth got out of the car and, picking up her bag of containers, walked up to the mansion. June answered the door herself. "Elizabeth, how delightful to see you. It's been much too long."

"Thank you, June. I hope I didn't disturb you," El said as she walked into the mansion.

"Not at all, but I was just on my way out."
"I have some items for Neal I'd like to drop off. Do you know if he's home?"

"I heard sounds coming out of his apartment, so I think he must be there. Feel free to go on upstairs."

When Elizabeth arrived at the top of the stairs, she could hear a rustling of papers inside. Knocking on the door, she called out, "Neal, it's Elizabeth."

There was no answer. She waited and listened. The rustling had stopped—she must have caught him at a bad time. Still, it was odd that he didn't answer her. Knocking again, she called out, "Neal, it's me, Elizabeth."

She heard footsteps and then slowly the door opened, but only a crack. Peeking out at her from behind the door was an odd-looking man. Middle-aged, bald, with large, thick glasses, and a pencil sticking out from behind the glasses like an antenna, he eyed her apprehensively. He was wearing an old cardigan sweater which appeared to have bits of paper stuck to it. His left hand held a long ruler as if it were a sword. It was all very curious.

"Who are you?" El blurted.

"More to the point, who are you?" he demanded, brandishing his ruler. "I'm engaged in important work here. You should leave"—his gaze fixed on her bag—"unless you have samples? Are you here selling cookies? You're a little old to be a Girl Scout."

"My name's Elizabeth Burke. I'm a friend of Neal's. I have something for him," El said, flustered.

"Ah, any relation to Peter Burke?"

"He's my husband."

"So you're Mrs. Suit," he said as he lowered his ruler. "I've long speculated about you. We were predestined to meet. You may enter." He stepped back and opened the door wide enough to let her squeeze in.

"You may call me Mozzie," he said as he directed her to a chair away from the table. "I am Neal's mentor, his advisor, his spiritual and mystical guide."

"So you're Mozzie!" El exclaimed. "Peter's mentioned you . . . in the most glowing terms, of course," she added hastily as he darted a suspicious glance at her.

"Neal's also talked about you." Mozzie had appeared to relax as if he'd finally accepted she wasn't a threat. "He should be back soon. I've been providing invaluable assistance on a case he and your husband are working on. They were in over their heads and at a loss on how to proceed until I offered my services."

"Those papers and … toys, they concern the case?" El asked. The table and chairs were covered with paper and diagrams. Among the clutter were some oddly-shaped objects—round paper cutouts in bright designs—that had been connected to each other to form strange 3-dimensional shapes. Scraps of paper littered the floor.

"Fiendishly clever puzzles from an adversary who may be worthy of my time. . . . What's in your bag?" he asked abruptly, trying to peer in.

"Oh, I should put these in the fridge. I'd brought them over for Neal. They're from an event I coordinated last night. Neal arranged for a fantastic caterer to help me out and these are some of
"Neal would definitely want me to sample them first." Mozzie started shoving papers furiously into huge stacks on the table. The paper objects he moved to Neal's bed. "There, that should give us room. What do you have?" Rubbing his hands together he grabbed the bag and started opening the containers.

"Wild boar pâté, mini salmon croque-monsieurs, and a pear tart," El said helplessly.

"Excellent, you must join me!" Scurrying to the kitchen, Mozzie rummaged in Neal's cabinet for a few minutes then returned, loaded down with plates, crackers, and a bottle of wine.

El, watching the flurry of preparations, couldn't resist a giggle. It was if she'd gone down the rabbit hole and been invited to tea by the Mad Hatter.

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Notes: Pribilof's algorithm is fictitious, except to Mozzie. If you're curious about Apian wheels and the Astronomicum Caesarum with its spectacular woodcuts, I've pinned some images to The Woman in Blue board at our Caffrey Conversation Pinterest site at www.pinterest.com/caffreycon.

In the next chapter, we take time out from the case for Family Day at Columbia while Mozzie continues his research.

Many thanks to Penna Nomen who had many excellent suggestions for this chapter. Your comments to the last chapter were much appreciated and very helpful for future plot-spinning!

Neal returned home from his morning lecture at Columbia shortly after twelve o'clock, having successfully warded off Aidan's attempts to lure him away for fencing practice. He'd abandoned Mozzie for several hours now. The least he could do is be there to offer his assistance. Not that Mozzie would probably accept it...

The previous night Mozzie had worked well into the early morning before finally collapsing on the couch. Building working models of all the Apian wheels had become his new obsession. When Neal tried to help, he shooed him impatiently away, mumbling *non iam, vadam*. Even if Neal hadn't understood Latin, it would have still been abundantly clear he was being given the brush-off.

June's house was quiet when he entered. She must have already left for her Saturday afternoon ladies poker club meeting. As Neal headed upstairs, he was surprised to hear voices coming from the loft—not just Mozzie's, but a woman's. Had June canceled her poker session?

"The complex bouquet in my osso buco can only be achieved with a wine from the Piedmont region, preferably—Ah, I see our host has returned." Mozzie, interrupting himself, gave a cavalier wave in Neal's direction.

A curious sight awaited Neal when he walked in. Sitting at his table between mountains of paper, Mozzie and El apparently were having a picnic. "May I join the party?" he asked with a hopeful smile.

"Neal, I'm so glad you're back," El exclaimed. "I had brought you some of Jacques's creations from the event last night. I believe there's still some left, although I had been hoping there would be more."

"Why have you been keeping El away from me?" Mozzie asked as he scooped up papers from one of the chairs so Neal would have somewhere to sit. "She's delightful. My opinion of the suit has risen several notches already. Wine? You must try the pâté. It really is outstanding."


"Peter, honestly, he was quite charming. He even insisted we trade telephone numbers to share recipes."

Despite El's reassurance, Peter was far from convinced he wanted her anywhere near Mozzie, let alone exchanging telephone numbers. Maybe if he at least knew his last name—and could run a thorough background check—then perhaps they could "share recipes," but until that time keeping Neal's odd friend under quarantine seemed far safer.

But for the rest of the day Peter was happy to exclude Mozzie from his thoughts. Luckily they'd been able to park close to the Columbia campus and were now walking through the quad to the Family Day opening reception for Visual Arts families.

"I'm surprised it feels so much like a proper campus," said El as she scanned the buildings around them. "Once you walk through the gates and step into the quad, it's hard to believe you're in Manhattan. It seems so peaceful and serene." She put her arm around his. "How does it feel to be at
Columbia as a surrogate dad visiting your kid?"

"Weird. We bypassed all those awkward high school days: learning how to drive, dates, the whole birds and the bees thing, for which I'll be eternally grateful. I don't even want to think about how that would have gone."

"And don't forget, we're also not saddled with a mountain of college debt. Columbia is so frightfully expensive. When I heard that Neal had been accepted, I was overjoyed of course but also wondered how in the world he was going to pay for it."

"I know what you mean. Hughes had looked into the FBI tuition-assistance program but since he's a consultant, Neal's not eligible—"

"Here are some familiar faces!"

Turning around, Peter saw Neal's aunt, Noelle Winslow, hurrying up the path. Noelle was dressed simply in a pullover sweater and skirt, her blonde hair shining in the brilliant midday sun. She'd abandoned her customary high heels for flats more suitable for the amount of walking Neal had warned them about. They stopped to let her catch up.

"I hear you saw Joe last night. Where'd you go?" El asked.

"He took me to a lovely Italian restaurant in Murray Hill. I'd mentioned I'd be in town, and he happened to be here visiting clients."

"Interesting coincidence," Peter remarked. "You've been seeing a good deal of each other. My brother spends more time in Baltimore than New York these days. Hope he's behaving himself."

"Or maybe not," El couldn't resist adding. "You're looking very happy, and I couldn't be more thrilled for you."

"Let's get back to discussing Neal before I get into trouble," Noelle said with a laugh. "I haven't heard much from him since classes started, but Columbia seems to be going well. Hopefully he's finding time for sleep occasionally. When I was an undergrad I was surviving on around five hours a night. My parents used to call me the Raccoon because I always had dark circles around my eyes."

"Did you get your graduate degree here?" El asked.

"No, I went to the University of Maryland for that, but the Caffreys have had a long association with Columbia. My father also attended Columbia. I tried to get Henry interested, but he wanted to strike off on his own."

"That sounds like your son," said Peter. "How is Henry, by the way?"

"He seems happy, but I only hear from him occasionally." Noelle sighed. "I didn't dream when Henry said he was taking off for India, that he'd be gone so long . . . but today I'm focusing on Neal." She turned to Peter. "Juggling a job and classes can't be easy. Is he managing that to your satisfaction?"

"Does he talk to you about his work?" asked Peter.

"No, I have the impression he'd rather not discuss it with me. Is there something I should know?"

Peter wasn't surprised to hear Noelle's reply. He suspected Neal wasn't simply concerned about the
confidentiality of the cases, but that he didn't want Noelle worrying about him in addition to Henry. "Neal's been instrumental in solving some cases for us. I really can't say that Columbia has had an adverse impact."

"I'm glad to hear it."

Neal was waiting for them in the Fine Arts Center. It was surprisingly crowded with more students and parents than Peter had expected. Tables of refreshments had been set up in the center of the main gallery.

"This is quite a turnout," El remarked. "I'd thought the graduate program was very small."

"It is," agreed Neal as he handed them their name badges. "Most of the people you see are freshmen with their parents. It's unusual to have so many of the artists who are associated with the program in attendance and that's been a contributing factor. It's a who's who of the contemporary arts scene. In the afternoon, the art history department will take over the gallery for a reception for their grad students. No undergrads allowed in that one. Sherkov, my advisor, is in charge of the bar and doesn't want the hassle of carding anyone."

"What else is on the agenda?" Noelle asked. "This is far different from anything I experienced in the psychology department. I'm beginning to think I picked the wrong major."

"You're right, starving artists know how to throw a good party, especially if they don't have to pay for it. Later on there are open houses at the two studio halls, with tours, demos and short presentations. Sound interesting?"

"Definitely," said El as she scanned the gallery. "Is that Myra Stockman over on the left? I saw her exhibit at the Guggenheim."

Neal turned his head to look. "Yes, she's one of my mentors. Would you like to meet her?"

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"I imagine Elizabeth gave you an earful about her encounter with Mozzie," Neal said, picking up a canapé.

He and Peter were standing at the buffet table. Elizabeth and Noelle had abandoned them in favor of a Q&A session with faculty and visiting artists.

"Got that right," Peter said as he helped himself to the shrimp dip. "What surprised me was how much she liked him."

"Mozzie can be quite appealing, especially when he's not with members of the law enforcement establishment. When I arrived they were discussing cooking techniques for osso buco."

"Any progress on the Galileo front?"

"We've been able to eliminate a few possibilities. The number sequences formed by the moon location variances don't correspond to any of the codes we've used on them up to now, but it's a slow process. I could have a roommate for a very long time."

"He's not sleeping there too, is he?" Peter winced in sympathy at Neal's nod.

"There's not much I can do to help so I've been going to my studio to escape," Neal admitted, adding as Noelle and Elizabeth walked up. "Ready to go on the studio tour?"
"More than ever," exclaimed Noelle. "The artists were effusive in their praise of Columbia's facilities. I'd like to see them for myself. When I was at Columbia I didn't have artist friends and never got over to the studios."

"We could take a shuttle bus if you like? Watson Hall, where my studio is, is a little west of the main campus. It's about a fifteen-minute walk."

"Let's walk," said Elizabeth. "It's a beautiful day and I'd like to see more of the campus."

When they left the reception, Neal led them diagonally across the quad. As they passed the library, Neal pointed out a building to Peter. "See that tall building on the right? Notice what's on top?"

Peter gazed up and saw a small dome on top of the red brick building. "Is that an observatory?"

"You got it. That's Pupin Hall. It's where they conducted nuclear research in the early days. The uranium atom was first split there in 1939, and one of the country's first cyclotrons is in the basement." Responding to Noelle's smile, he added, "Hey, I did my homework to be a qualified guide. Peter, it may interest you to hear Pupin holds monthly observation sessions for the public."

"We should go sometime after work," Peter said. "Nothing like the frigid air of a cold observatory in January," he added enthusiastically, amused by Neal's wide-eyed look of panic. "The sky's much clearer on nights when it's below freezing. We should hold off till then. Just wait till you feel that arctic blast in your face as the wind comes racing through the telescope window."

"Enough, Peter," El put a hand over his mouth. "Neal, you do realize he's joshing you, right?"

"With him, it's hard to tell sometimes. I didn't know if he were planning on a new round of indoctrination with Astronomy Boot Camp."

"Ah, but you could exact your revenge by leading him on a chase through the tunnels," suggested Noelle in a loud whisper. Peter, looking at her mischievous expression, was struck by how much she resembled Henry. She must have been every bit as much a challenge for her parents to handle as he was.

Neal's eyes lit up at the prospect. "I like the way you think. We need to drop the others off somewhere, so you can show me the secret passages you discovered."

"Tunnels? What tunnels?" asked Peter. "Before you go planting ideas in Neal's head, I need details."

"The campus is laced with underground tunnels," said Noelle. "Some are still in use; many are blocked off, and then there are the others"—she paused melodramatically—"which are only rumored to exist. There's been many a college prank in those tunnels. Your grandfather Edmund in a weak moment and after much cajoling, told me about an especially outrageous one he'd participated in. You should ask him about it next time you see him."

When they arrived at Watson Hall they found several groups of parents and students already touring the facilities. Artists had set up demonstrations in the digital media center and wood shop. Brief talks were scheduled for throughout the afternoon.

Neal led them to his studio. The worktable was covered with drawings and sketches. Several paintings in various stages of completion were on easels.
"This is much more spacious than I imagined," El said as she gazed around. She walked over to one of the paintings—the one Peter had seen Neal work on the night Mansfeld had been killed. "Myra Stockman mentioned this painting, Neal. She said it showed real promise."

"She did?" Neal stared at her in astonishment. "She must have been feeling unusually generous with all the parents around. She told me I'd tried to squeeze too much into a confined space and recommended I execute a large-scale version for the spring exhibition."

Noelle was studying a large abstract sketch on the table. Peter joined her. Where was Neal going with it? Maybe clouds? Amorphous shapes were heaped on top of each other. The effect appeared multidimensional. As he stared at it, he started to detect recognizable forms but they quickly dissolved into other formations, losing their identity in the process. It was almost as if they were alive. How did he achieve that?

Neal joined them. "Do you like it?" he asked.

"It's mesmerizing… like a puzzle you could stare at for hours," Peter said, scratching his head. "I can't get a handle on it. Just when I think a shape reminds me of something, it gets lost into something else."

"That may be the point," Noelle commented as she looked at it. "What are your plans for it, Neal?"

"Eventually I'll create it in oils for the exhibition," Neal said. "I'm still conceptualizing it."

"What do you call it?" Peter asked.

"For now The Shapeshifter. That may change"—Neal paused and frowned as he contemplated the sketch—"just like the picture."

El pointed to another one of his canvases. The paint was being piled on so thick, it almost seemed like a sculpture. Only small sections had been done. There were some geometric lines, the outline of a cube.

"Do you have a name for this?" she asked.

"I was thinking of calling it The Rock," Neal replied. "It's still very rough. I may wind up turning it into a bas-relief."

"It's a very impressive start," El said. "I like where you're going with it."

"I hope I'm able to do justice to the idea."

Peter wandered over to a whiteboard on the wall. At the top in large letters were SAS. A small doodle of a figure was at the bottom. "What's SAS?" he asked.

"It's a group I belong to," Neal said offhandedly.

"What do the letters stand for?"

"Sorry, that's restricted to need-to-know," said Neal, giving him a grin.

"Is that a zombie?"

"Open to interpretation."

Noelle joined them. "That looks like a Voodoo doll dangling from the top of the board. Is there
"Did I fail to mention I'm seeing a new doctor now? A few weeks ago I had a problem with my studio being haunted, but not anymore."

"I'm glad you didn't call me for that," Noelle responded in kind. "I missed the classes on exorcism."

After several minutes of discussion, El and Noelle took off to attend the demo at the media center. But Peter was more interested in a tour of the building. He wanted to take full advantage of exploring a place where Neal spent so much time. As they started off down the corridor, Neal paused at the studio immediately adjacent to his. Calling in to its occupant who was sculpting in clay at his worktable, he said, "Richard, this is Peter, my honorary dad."

Richard rose to greet them with a welcoming smile and seemed genuinely pleased to meet Peter. He was a little shorter than Neal with brown curly hair and an easygoing manner. The three of them sat down and swapped stories for several minutes.

Neal had mentioned Richard to Peter and he'd been looking forward to meeting him. In Peter's view, that was one of the best parts of Columbia. It gave Neal an opportunity to have friends who knew nothing about his criminal past and weren't a constant reminder of his former life. That was something his colleagues at White Collar couldn't do.

Taking in Richard's studio, Peter noted the guitar propped up in the corner and a similar whiteboard on the wall. It also had SAS emblazoned on the top and what appeared to be the identical doodle. "I see you're also a member of SAS," Peter said, "and the meaning of that is . . . what was it again? Society of Artists and Sculptors?"

"That sounds good," said Richard.

"Incorrect, but good," agreed Neal.

After they finished their exploration, they joined the women at the media center. "If you want to see the other hall, we'll need to take the shuttle bus," Neal said. "It's over a half-mile from the campus on 125th Street and a universe away in a gritty neighborhood of auto-repair shops and tenements in West Harlem. It used to be a milk bottling plant and now houses both music and art studios. There's graffiti scrawled on the walls, exposed pipes running along the corridors, very inspirational if you're into industrial grunge."

"The latest home for the Cotton Club isn't far from there," El added. "I've been there but didn't realize there were any university buildings close by."

"There are plans floating around to revitalize the area and build an extension campus called Manhattanville," Neal said, "but that will take at least a decade, probably longer."

"I should talk with Joe about it," Noelle remarked as they walked down the corridor to the exit. "Neal, did you know that Joe has a special interest in urban revitalization projects? He's been working on a revitalization project for Baltimore."

"So that's why he's been going to Baltimore so much," Neal said, clearly enjoying yet another opportunity to tease her. "Glad we got that cleared up."

Prentis Hall was as raw as Neal promised. It retained the appearance of a minimally converted factory. Along with studios, several workshops opened out onto the corridors, including a wood shop, ceramics room, and digital media center.
Neal paused at the metal shop. "This is where I forged those Roman coins," he told Peter.

"You're forging for the FBI?" Noelle asked, raising a brow.

"All legal and even reimbursed," Neal said cheerfully.

"Hey, D'Artagnan!"

A tall student, about Neal's height and build, with red hair waved to them. Introducing himself as Aidan Phillips, he was taking his parents on a tour.

"D'Artagnan?" Peter asked. "What's the story behind that?"

"After Neal fenced me to the ground, it seemed fitting," Aidan said. "I coerced him into joining the club fencing team."

Peter stared at Neal in disbelief. "You didn't tell me you're on a club team now."

Neal shrugged, clearly reveling in Peter's astonishment. "Hey, you told me to embrace the college experience."

Peter tried to wrap his head around the Neal he knew participating on a college sports team. This had been a day of eye-opening revelations. Neal's transformation from an elusive con artist and thief into a valued consultant for the FBI had been surprisingly smooth, and Peter was even coming to grips with Neal's risk-loving Houdini side. But this was something different—Neal, the grad student, with friends his own age, liked by his professors, on a college team … It was all so normal. He didn't know that Neal could do normal.

Neal took them upstairs for a brief tour of the computer music center before leaving Prentis Hall. As they walked by a corridor of music studios, El stopped Neal by one of them. "This studio is marked reserved for SAS at 8 p.m. tonight. Isn't that the same term you had in your studio?"

"We've reserved that for the band. Our first rehearsal's tonight. Turns out several of us are musicians. One of us—no, not me—had the bright idea we should form a band. It's more like a garage band than anything else."

"Tell me about it," Noelle said as she took Neal's arm.

Closing Reception, Fine Arts Center, Columbia University

"Za Tyebya!" Neal said as he clinked glasses with Peter. They were standing off to one side in the art gallery after Neal had snagged them a couple of glasses of wild berry vodka. Sherkov was talking with El by the buffet, and the last time Peter saw Noelle, she'd been deep in conversation with one of Neal's professors.

"Za Tyebya!" Peter repeated. Copying Neal, he swirled the vodka in his glass and sniffed it before taking a sip. "What did I just say?"

"Here's to you," Neal explained with a laugh. "I could have told you anything, you know. You sure you want to trust me?"

"I'm sure," Peter said with a slow nod, emphasizing his words.

"And I meant what I said," Neal replied, suddenly growing more serious himself. "It means a lot to me for you, El, and Noelle to be here and that"—Neal hesitated and cleared his throat—"you're
willing to put up me as your surrogate son. I never would have been admitted to Columbia if you hadn't helped. But more than that, you took a giant leap of faith when you recruited me, something I don't think anyone else would have dared. That means more than I can ever adequately express. So, za tyebya and thank you."

That was more than a little overwhelming and totally out of the blue. Peter wanted to reply in kind, but this was the sort of thing he was lousy at. "Hey," he said gruffly, "I couldn't be prouder of you if you were my own son. To be here on campus with you as your dad is an experience I'll never forget. As far as I'm concerned, you can forget that surrogate bit."

"What are you two talking about?" El asked as she approached them. "You're looking very serious for two people drinking vodka."

"Having a moment here, El," said Peter. "Giving my kid a pat on the back."

"And a very well-deserved one," El added. "Sherkov was lavish in his praise of you, Neal."

Neal laughed it off. "He treats all the grad students like family and this is one super-sized family reunion, Russian style. He told me how excited he was to meet you."

"Neal!" Peter turned his head to see who'd called out. "Glad I spotted you. I hope I'm not interrupting." An attractive blonde accompanied by an older man, perhaps her father, had approached them. She looked familiar, but Peter couldn't place where he'd seen her before. Must have been at one of Neal's classes. Had she been the one Neal had been talking to at Sherkov's seminar?

"Where've you been hiding?" Neal said, breaking into a broad smile. "I was looking for you earlier. Fiona, I'd like you to meet Elizabeth and Peter Burke... ."

Walking back to their car after the closing reception, El murmured to Peter, "This has been quite a day. I had wondered how difficult it would be for Neal to adjust to university life, and I can see now, my fears were groundless. Instead my only concern is how he manages to find any time to sleep."

"I'd been worried about how Neal would fit in too," Peter replied. "He told me when he started classes that he had a tough time believing it was all real and not simply a con. It bothered me that he would always feel like an outsider. He'd missed out on so many of the normal childhood experiences—Little League, Boy Scouts, all the activities a kid would normally do with his dad. And then while others his age were in college getting their bachelor degrees, he was off roaming through Europe becoming a world-class con artist, never staying in one place long enough to develop close friendships. I didn't know if attending Columbia would be too wide a chasm to cross. But what impressed me about today was how at home he seemed. Just another grad student... although a much more brilliant one than anyone else."

"There speaks a proud father," El said with a fond smile.

"You got that right. That's what I was telling Neal when you walked up at the reception."

El paused at the car door. "Neal's putting down roots now. Reconnecting with his relatives, making friends. Do you ever think about what would have happened if you hadn't bumped into each other in St. Louis? What his life would have been like?"

"He was heading for prison, El," Peter said somberly. "Sooner or later he would have stumbled."
And then, instead of working at the FBI and going for his master's, he would've been rotting in a prison cell." Opening the car door for her, he added, "What a waste for someone who has so much potential."

"I'm so glad you had that conversation with him. I can't bear the thought of Neal being locked up in prison."

"And I haven't forgotten that starting that conversation was your inspired idea, Mrs. Burke," said Peter, giving her a kiss. "I may be his surrogate dad, but you're his guardian angel."

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Notes: The tunnels in Columbia are very real and the stories concerning them are the stuff of legends. I've pinned a map of the tunnel system to The Woman in Blue board at our Caffrey Conversation Pinterest site at www.pinterest.com/caffreycon. Columbia's tunnels are an irresistible lure for Neal and will play a major role in my next story, The Queen's Jewels, which I'll begin posting once The Woman in Blue is concluded. I was delighted to read your comments about Mozzie in Chapter 18. He'll also be a key player in the next story.

The account of that life-changing meeting in St. Louis between Neal and Peter is related in Caffrey Conversation by Penna Nomen. In the story she's currently posting, Caffrey Disclosure, one of the main themes is how Neal is able to pay for Columbia. Penna, best muse-in-chief ever, was also the driving force for many improvements to this chapter.

I posted this on February 14. It wouldn't do to have too angsty a chapter on Valentine's Day so we took a break for Family Day, but that won't last long. Events take on a new urgency this coming Tuesday when I post Chapter 20: A Turn of the Wheel.
Neal heard Peter on the stairs. Neal grinned as he listened to Peter's fast approaching footsteps. He sounded like he was taking the stairs two at a time.

As he burst through the door, Peter paused and caught his breath. "Okay, I'm here. What did you find?"

"I thought my call would get your attention. Four days and sleepless nights, reams of paper, and countless bottles of wine have not been in vain. Mozzie, you tell him."

Mozzie glanced up from his paper model. I should have made him shave, Neal thought. He does look like the lunatic fringe. No way Peter will believe him.

"I cracked the first code," Mozzie said, an expression of bliss spreading over his face.

"The first code?" Peter asked, startled.

"Yes, and don't repeat me every time I say something. It will take much longer. Neal, he needs wine."

"No wine," Peter said with a groan. "An answer and coffee in that order."

"Sit down." Mozzie pulled out a blown-up copy of the Galileo manuscript. "Prepare to be enlightened. As you already noted there are eleven sketches on the manuscript indicating the positions of Jupiter. Three of the sketches show Jupiter with three moons, and eight depict four moons with the planet. Working through the various permutations, combinations, inversions and modulations, and after the construction of, let me see, three hundred twenty-four different matrices at last count, I've succeeded in finding a recognizable pattern. If you take the moon variances for only the three sketches that show Jupiter with three moons and apply the Jianyi code derived from Guo Shoujing's armillary, the numbers are transformed into this: wheel 7." Mozzie sat back in exhausted triumph. "I can see you're so dazed by my genius, you're having trouble speaking. An understandable reaction."

Peter looked at Neal. "Does any of that make sense to you?" he asked in bewilderment.

"It helps to have gone through the transmutations with him," Neal acknowledged. "And a lack of sleep adds a certain clarity."

"Allow me to enlighten," Mozzie said with benign tolerance. "Wheel 7 can only refer to the seventh Apian wheel found in Astronomicum Caesarum. The seventh wheel just happens to be the one plotting the motion of Jupiter. I rest my case."

"Mozzie believes that if he somehow applies the numbers found for the other eight sketches to the seventh Apian wheel, that will provide the solution," Neal added as he handed Peter a mug of coffee.

Peter sighed in frustration and took a large sip. "Guys, I appreciate all your work, but this doesn't sound like an answer or at least anything that can be verified and acted upon. Tell me, you have something else."
"I know it sounds incredibly thin," Neal said, "but it's the only thing that sounds remotely possible. We're working on the assumption that this Azathoth character varied the sketches to leave a message. That the message could be decoded with an Apian wheel sounds reasonable. And as for Mozzie's deciphering, the Jianyi code is based on a Chinese astronomer and a medieval astronomical device, so there is a connection, even if somewhat tenuous..." Neal's voice trailed off. Listening to himself, even he thought he was nuts. No wonder Peter was having a hard time swallowing it.

Mozzie broke into his thoughts. "You two should leave now. I need to work in silence and solitude. Suit, take Neal away. I'll call when I'm ready."

White Collar Division. October 27, 2004. Wednesday afternoon

Neal looked up from the reports on his desk and stretched his back. Experts had finished their review of all the other manuscripts and books on display and nothing had shown up. He supposed that was a good sign. This case was convoluted enough. It was now Wednesday. Two days ago Mozzie had made his breakthrough and cracked the initial code which directed them to the seventh Apian wheel. But nothing since then. Mozzie was still in possession of his loft to work on the puzzle. Rows of empty wine bottles lined up on the counter marked the hours of research he'd put in. Neal's attempts to help had been rebuffed, so he'd wound up maintaining his normal schedule of work and classes. They were no closer to tracking down the stolen manuscript.

Neal picked up his coffee mug and headed for the breakroom. Out of desperation he took time out to read the bulletin board notices.

Peter walked in while he was committing to memory the latest org chart. "I assume there's no news."

"How'd you guess? I talked with Jones earlier today. There's nothing that's come in about the Galileo manuscript. No chatter about someone wanting to buy it."

"I've had Tricia and Diana researching secret Lovecraft societies. Even made The Call of Cthulhu required reading—that brought out the comments. They've found plenty of fan groups but no criminal links to any of them. I hate to say it, but Mozzie's research seems to be the only avenue that's going anywhere. Has he made any progress?"

"I called him a couple of hours ago. He told me to hang up. That either means he's found something or he's turning into a ghoul himself. Or maybe both. Could be hard to distinguish. Do you know what it's like to wake up in the middle of the night and see his ghost-like figure, lit only by a candle, muttering in Latin a few feet away? Did I mention he's renounced electric lights for the duration?" Resisting the urge to run a hand through his hair, Neal added, "I'm not sure how much longer I'll—"

Neal's cell phone buzzed. Glancing at the display, he held it up triumphantly in front of Peter: "Mozzie."

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Responding to Mozzie's summons, both Peter and Neal rushed over to the loft. "What'd you find?" Neal asked as soon as they entered.

"May be nothing, may be something. In any case worth investigating," Mozzie said. His scruff had by now filled in enough to be called a beard. "By using the moon variances to position the seventh Apian wheel, I was able to derive a series of sixteen numbers which I surmise correspond to a GPS
Mozzie proceeded to show Neal and Peter how he'd used the wheel to perform the calculations. Neal found it almost impossible to follow, but amazingly Peter appeared to understand what he was doing. Peter had Mozzie go through Apian's description of how the wheel should be operated and then made him explain every calculation. The two of them worked with the wheel for more than an hour, making Neal sorely regret he hadn't taken advanced trigonometry.

"How did you deduce the minus symbol?" Peter asked as he pointed to a spot on the wheel.

"Through the inverse relationship of the arc," Mozzie explained. "It's patently obvious that any other method would have been incorrect."

"Okay, just for the moment, let's assume you're right," Peter said. "What location does this produce?"

Mozzie pulled out a map. "Jones Beach State Park on Long Island. This road runs along the beach. I've marked the exact location here," and Mozzie indicated a red dot on the map. "The GPS coordinates are written next to the point."

"This is absurd," Peter muttered. "Why am I even considering this?"

"Do we have anything else?" Neal reminded him. "We should check out the location. If there's nothing there, we'll go back to the drawing board. What's your schedule like tomorrow?"

Peter picked up Mozzie's calculations once more and scanned them. "All right," he said finally, "after the morning briefing, we can head out. Mozzie, if this turns out to be anything other than a wild goose chase, I'll buy you a bottle of wine myself."

"I'll start on my list of preferred vineyards," he said absent-mindedly, his thoughts clearly elsewhere.

"Mozzie?" Neal prompted, growing nervous. Mozzie was looking unexpectedly serious.

"It just occurred to me that the seventh wheel may have another meaning. When I saw it was used to calculate Jupiter's motion, I knew it must be the wheel Azathoth would have chosen, but I failed to consider its other significance."

"And that is?" Peter's eyes bored into him.

"Seventh wheel could refer to Dante's seventh circle of Hell, the circle which corresponds to violence and suicides."

"It could also refer to Snow White and the Seven Dwarves," Peter noted with a sigh. "Do we really want to consider every possible significance to seven? I know I called you Dante when we first talked, but I'll go out on a limb and say that Azathoth wasn't eavesdropping at the time."

"You're right, Suit. Probably just a coincidence. You'll be fine."


The stretch of highway where Mozzie's coordinates had directed them was over an hour away on a barrier island off Long Island. In summer Jones Beach would have been packed with families, but on a chilly afternoon in late October the highway was deserted, the beach empty.
Neal looked out the passenger-side window. "Do you and El ever come here?"

"In the summer it's too crowded for our taste. El loves the beach though. We went to a Caribbean island on our honeymoon. Had our own secluded bungalow. Someday, I'll have to find the time so we can go back. How about you? Any beachcombing in your past?"

"Not growing up. St Louis is not known for its sandy stretches of pristine beaches. But later on, I did manage to squeeze in some time on the Côte d' Azur. Beachcombing, however, wasn't high up on my list of pursuits."

Peter checked his GPS tracker. "We're approaching the location. The GPS reading corresponds to that bait shack on the north side of the highway."

Pulling off alongside the bait shack, they surveyed the area. There were no other buildings in sight. The road itself was unmarked except for a wildlife refuge sign a hundred or so yards away. Getting out of the car, Neal was struck by the isolation of the area. A cold wind was blowing off the ocean, making him wish he'd worn a warmer jacket. A few seabirds flew overhead, their plaintive peeps echoing in the sand dunes.

Neal stood alongside the road, taking in the atmospheric setting. The shack was a lonely outpost confronting the vastness of the ocean. He felt the first elusive whispers of a painting swirling in his mind and paused, trying to capture in his memory all the impressions of the moment. But he was not here to paint, and Peter was already approaching the shack.

A sign was stuck on the door announcing its closure till summer. Neal tried to peer through the shutters on the windows but was unable to make out anything. They circled the shack and found nothing of interest.

"Shouldn't we go inside?" he suggested.

Peter shook his head. "We can't break in and we don't have a warrant. I don't even want to contemplate going to a judge and asking for one based on an Apian wheel."

"We've come all the way out here. Let's at least try the door—maybe it's unlocked." Before Peter could reply, Neal pushed the handle. The door opened. "No law against us opening an unlocked door, is there?" Peter hesitated for a moment then followed him in. The door closed behind him with a soft thud.

The center of the shack was filled with a shelving unit containing various supplies and fishing gear. There was a closed door behind the counter—perhaps an office. Along the walls were a few freezer chests, with fishing supplies and sundry goods arranged on shelves on the wall. The air was heavy with a pervasive dank, fishy odor.

"Well, as long as we're here..." Pulling out latex gloves, Peter started sorting through some books on the counter.

Neal moved to the fishing supply display. He had a growing sense of unease. It must be the smell—not overwhelming, but definitely strong enough to make him feel glad he hadn't eaten lunch yet.

Peter called out, "Look at this," and held up a paperback edition of The Lurking Fear. "Mozzie may be on to something after all. I wouldn't think books by Lovecraft would be among the standard goods for sale at a bait shack."

As Neal walked toward Peter, he caught a glimpse of something rising up behind the counter. "Peter, behind you!"
Thick, yellowish-green smoke had started pouring out of an opening in the floor. One whiff of it was enough to make his head reel. Neal grabbed his jacket lapel to cover his nose and mouth, but it was too late. He'd already breathed in some of the noxious fumes. Choking, he fell to the floor as his lungs seized up.

Peter staggered toward the door and fumbled with the handle, unable to open it. Trying to stay under the smoke, Neal crawled over to help him. He was fighting desperately to keep his eyes open but they were watering so badly it was hard to see.

Together they lunged repeatedly against the door, but it wouldn't budge. By this time the smoke had completely engulfed the room. Both of them were coughing so hard, it was impossible to talk.

The last thing Neal remembered was clawing with his fingers at the edge of the door, frantically trying to open it. Incongruously in the distance it sounded like someone was playing a pipe. Then blackness.


"Peter, you here?" El walked into the living room and called again. "Peter?"

She'd returned home mid-afternoon and was surprised to see Peter's car parked on the street near the house. He hadn't said anything about coming home early. Had he forgotten a file?

Satchmo came bounding over to greet her. "Good boy, Satchmo," she said as she stroked him. "Where's your daddy?"

Satchmo was friendly but unhelpful. Puzzled, El checked downstairs, upstairs, the patio—Peter was nowhere to be found. Growing increasingly alarmed she got out her car keys and went out to the car. When she opened it, she found Peter's cell phone on the passenger side as well as another one. Neal's perhaps? Peter never went anywhere without his cell. What would have caused him to leave it in the car? El pulled out her own cell phone and called Peter's office. She was directed to his voicemail.

Going back into the house, she pulled up Tricia's number and called her.

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"Hughes has made this top-priority," Tricia said reassuringly as she handed El a cup of tea. "With all our agents mobilized, I'm sure something will turn up soon." She sat down beside El on the couch.

El nodded but didn't feel comforted. She understood all too well the gravity of having two agents missing. By the time she'd talked with Tricia on the phone, she'd already known how serious the situation was.

Tricia, accompanied by several other agents, had arrived shortly afterwards. While a team went over the car, she sat with Elizabeth and described what she knew of Peter's schedule. After the morning briefing, Peter had advised Tricia that he and Neal were going to check out a location on Jones Beach. Jones and Diana were now driving to the GPS coordinates he'd indicated.

Satchmo had plunked down in front of El and was pressing against her legs, his head on her lap. As she stroked him, El said, "I called June and alerted her. If she hears anything, she'll give me a call."

Travis walked in from outside and joined them in the living room. "We've dusted the car for fingerprints and are almost finished collecting forensic evidence. It's possible hair tests will reveal
"Of course not, and you better take Satchmo's as well." Satchmo lifted his head from El's lap when he heard his name. El continued to stroke him as she continued, "I've been trying to recall if anyone else had been in the car recently, but there's no one I can think of . . . " She paused, trying to control the quaver that had crept into her voice.

"It's okay, Elizabeth, we'll—" Tricia was interrupted by her cell phone vibrating. "Excuse me, I'll step outside to take this," she said as she started to get up.

"No," El protested, putting a hand on Tricia's arm. "Please don't leave."


She then turned to El. "Jones and Diana are at the location we believe Peter and Neal were investigating. It's a deserted bait shack on Ocean Parkway. There are multiple tire marks in the sand. Some of them we believe are from Peter's car." Taking El's hand, she added, "The shack is empty and there are no blood stains. That's a good sign, but there's also troubling evidence. Even though the shack looks dilapidated, that apparently is only a façade. The interior had been retrofitted to provide a tight seal, and they found traces of a lingering gas. They've called up a forensics team to conduct a thorough analysis."

El choked back a gasp at the news. "Have they found any witnesses?"

"No. Unfortunately there are no other buildings in the vicinity and the chance of finding a witness is remote. I need to get back to the office, but I'll have Travis stay here. He'll set up monitoring equipment in case you get a call. I'll work up a schedule so there will always be an agent here." Giving her hand a final squeeze, Tricia stood up. "Elizabeth, we're going to get them back. We won't rest until we find them."

El knew the drill. She knew all the reassuring statements that agents make. How many times had Peter made those to others? But she couldn't believe it was happening to her. She sat numbly on the couch, watching Tricia and Travis talk quietly in the entry and then Tricia leave. Did she say goodbye to Tricia? She couldn't remember. How much time had gone by?

Travis brought her another cup of tea. She'd met him at the party they'd held last June, but she'd only exchanged a few words with him. She vaguely recalled Peter talking about him. What had he said? Resident geek, that's it. He was quiet. Had compassionate eyes. He seemed calm, reassuring. She liked him. He set up his equipment on the dining room table. She should do something, but she couldn't decide what. She was in suspended animation, waiting . . .

The doorbell rang. Travis walked into the room. "I'll get it," he told her.

"Oh, I must have the wrong house. I'm with the neighborhood beautification committee—"

"Mozzie?" Springing up, El raced to the door. "He's a friend," she told Travis and taking Mozzie by the hand led him into the living room.

Eyeing Travis nervously, Mozzie sat down gingerly on the edge of a chair. He had an enormous scarf wrapped around his neck and carried a large shopping bag.

"Travis works at White Collar. He's here to monitor calls and be my protector," she said. "June told you what happened?"
Mozzie nodded. "I thought we could keep each other company." He looked over at Travis apprehensively, as if he expected him to jump him.

"Are you the one who's a whiz with Apian wheels?" Travis asked. "Neal explained how you'd been able to make working models. I'd looked over the designs myself and was at a loss."

"My knowledge of the abstruse and arcane is without equal," Mozzie confirmed.

"Neal called you a mastermind of incomparable magnitude," Travis agreed, giving El a wink.

Noticeably relaxing, Mozzie started digging into his bag. "You need something stronger than tea. I know Neal would want us to partake of this rather decent Merlot." Pulling out the wine and a corkscrew, he added, "Do you play games?"

"Games?" El asked, perplexed.

"Board games. I brought over several. Candy Land, Clue..." Mozzie began piling up games on the coffee table. "I didn't know your taste so brought over several to choose from."

Travis pulled up a chair and started going through them. "Here's a classic!" he said excitedly. "Star Trek: Warp Nine. I've heard about it but never played."

"Excellent choice. It's a favorite of mine. You solve challenges based on your character. Interested in giving it a try?"

"Sure, why not?" El said, going over to the sideboard for some glasses.

"I'll be Quark. We are compadres in deviousness." Studying Travis over his glasses, he added, "You shall be Spock. You're tall, have dark hair. Can you do inscrutable?"

Travis gave him the Vulcan salute. "A highly logical decision, I commend you, sir." Turning to El who was pouring wine, he added, "No wine for me, thanks."

"Very appropriate," said Mozzie. "Vulcans don't drink. Also, that leaves more for the rest of us."

"Who do I play? Uhura?" asked El.

"No, you should be Deanna," said Mozzie, "the ship's beautiful counselor-empath."

Travis grinned. "A wise decision."

"No grinning!" Mozzie chided. "You're Spock now, remember? Now the rules are simple. They're based on the Ferengi Rules of Acquisition, of which I am the sole master—"

Travis's cell phone buzzed. Holding up a cautionary finger at Mozzie, he took the call. "Yes, I understand... Of course... Not a problem."

Hanging up, he said soberly, "That was Tricia with an update. The gas that was found was a derivative of fentanyl. It's an incapacitating agent—"

"Knockout gas," broke in Mozzie.

"In layman's terms, yes," Travis acknowledged.

"That confirms they were abducted, doesn't it?" asked El, panic creeping back in.
"Yes, but this is also good news. The gas causes no lasting damage, and they should have no problem recovering from it," Travis said trying to reassure her. "The FBI, state and local police are all treating this as a kidnapping of two FBI agents. A massive search is underway. We're going to find them."

"But they have no leads on where they are, and no clues as to who took them, right?" said El, no longer able to quell the trembling in her voice.

Mozzie took her hand. "Listen to me. Neal and the suit are far smarter than anyone stupid enough to kidnap them. Mark my words. They'll escape and they won't need the FBI or the police to do it."

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**Notes:** In Chapter 21: Azathoth, Neal and Peter face an enemy unlike any they've ever encountered.

A few notes on this chapter: Guo Shoujing was a thirteenth Chinese astronomer renowned for his astronomical instruments, but Mozzie alone is familiar with any codes derived from them. *Star Trek: Warp 9* must have been a Mozzie creation as I've been unable to locate it in any stores. The June party at the Burkes' house is described in the first chapter of *Caffrey Disclosure* by Penna Nomen.

As for the reference to Dante's circles of hell, Peter shouldn't have been so cavalier in brushing off Mozzie's concern. Those of you who've read *Caffrey Conversation* may remember that Penna described how an unknown person called on Neal's cell phone when Neal was sick in a St. Louis hotel room. Peter answered the phone and had a lengthy conversation with a very odd character whom he called Dante since he refused to identify himself. At the time, Peter worried that this mysterious friend would lead Neal into "some very bad places." It may have been an omen but Mozzie was not the one to fear.

The Dante reference is just one example of the rich universe Penna created with *Caffrey Conversation*. I love revisiting her stories for inspiration and gems such as the Dante one above.
"What . . . ?"

What was going on? If the clown who was pounding on his head with a sledgehammer would lay off for a minute, it'd be a lot easier figuring that out. Neal vaguely considered opening his eyes, but it was too much of an effort. Better to just lie here. Wait. Where was here? What was he lying on? Cold, hard, not his bed, unless it'd turned into concrete overnight. He put a shaky hand to his head. Couldn't feel any bumps. No bleeding.

What was the last thing he remembered? That's right—the shack door. He was struggling to open the door … Peter! Where was Peter?

Neal opened his eyes wide. Blinking several times, all he could see was blackness. Had he gone blind? He rubbed his eyes, trying to focus. Holding up a hand in front of his face, he let out a deep breath when he could make out a faint outline. Out-of-focus, all fuzzy around the edges, but at least recognizable.

In the meantime, his headache was gradually lessening to a mere eight on the Richter scale. He gingerly felt his limbs and couldn't detect any injuries. Legs still attached, check. Arms still working, check. Gotta try to get up. Find Peter. Neal put a hand out to prop himself up, but quickly sank back to the ground as the floor rolled beneath him and took his stomach with it.

Change of plan. Stay on the ground. His head hurt badly enough. Absolutely no need for the nausea too. He lay with his eyes closed till his stomach decided to stop heaving. This time he didn't attempt to stand up but crawled along the ground.

The air reeked of decay. What was that stench? Was he in a sewer? No wonder his stomach wanted to abandon ship. It was slightly better if he breathed through the mouth to avoid smelling it. Squinting ahead, he saw a blurry shape and worked his way to it.

Good news—it was Peter. Bad news—he was apparently unconscious. Neal felt his neck for a pulse. Strong, fast. Maybe too fast? He felt his own pulse for comparison. It was also racing. That probably wasn't good, right? He couldn't detect any bleeding or obvious injuries.

Giving a gentle shake to his shoulder, Neal asked, "Peter, can you hear me?" and was rewarded with a groan in reply. A sarcastic retort would have been even better, but he'd make do with a groan for now.

"Peter, it's me, Neal. Talk to me."

Peter's eyes fluttered in response as he fumbled for words. "Neal . . . my head."

"Yeah, go slow. Mine too."

Neal helped support him as he struggled to sit up, but Peter had the same reaction as he did when he first attempted it. Putting a hand to his mouth as he gagged, Peter moaned, "God, what died? I'm gonna be sick."

"Close your eyes. It'll help. Better lie down for a few minutes." Neal helped Peter stretch out. Peter stayed like that, keeping his eyes closed and breathing heavily.
Swallowing a couple of times, he asked, "Where are we?"

"Dunno. Maybe a basement?" Neal stood up unsteadily. This time he managed to stay on his feet even as the floor pitched underneath him. He staggered to the closest wall and then slowly walked around the perimeter. "Cinder block walls, no windows. The walls seem to be coated in some sort of slime." Neal leaned over to sniff the slime and promptly gagged.

"What's wrong? You okay?" Peter demanded, blinking his eyes and squinting.

"Stay away from the slime on the walls. It's disgusting," Neal said. "The room's about twenty feet square. One door, locked." He went back to Peter. "How are you feeling now?"

"Better. Not going to puke immediately," Peter mumbled. "Is there something wrong with my eyes, or is it really dark in here? There's a weird glow to the walls. Is that me?"

"No, the slime seems to be faintly luminescent. Gives off a sickly green glow. What's the last thing you remember?"

Peter sat upright and stretched his back. "We were in the bait shack, trying to open the door, and then I must have passed out." Feeling his pockets, he added, "My watch, phone and gun—they're all gone. What about you?"

"Same thing. No phoning up the cavalry. Your eyes better?"

"Yeah, but I still feel like I'm drugged." Holding up his hand, Peter asked, "How many fingers am I holding up?"

Neal squinted. "Three?"

"Not quite, two. You try me."

Neal obediently held up his hand. "All right, how many do you see?"

"One but it's pulsating. God, it's making me sick again." Peter put a hand over his mouth.

"Maybe if you moved closer to the center of the room, you'd—Wait." Interrupting himself, Neal jerked his head to one side and listened intently. "Do you hear that?"

"What? I don't hear anything," Peter asked, looking around the room.

Tilting his head to the ceiling, Neal said, "There it is again. A faint piping sound. It's almost like those sandpipers we heard. Are we still on the beach?"

"I heard it this time too. Don't think it's a sandpiper. This sound's different. Longer maybe."

Without warning, a high-pitched shriek ripped through the blackness from the wall opposite them as if some ghastly fury from the netherworld were wailing for revenge. Blasted by the sheer evilness of the sound, Neal broke out in a cold sweat and instinctively moved close to Peter.

Seemingly in response to the shriek, the room was suddenly flooded with brilliant light, temporarily blinding them.

The unearthly screams continued, the sound becoming higher pitched and more intense as if something were hurtling toward them. Transfixed in horror, they watched the wall in front of them dissolve into a swirling sea of chaotic colors and grotesque shapes.
In the middle of the sea was a black void with a tiny pinpoint of light in the center. The light was hypnotic. Neal couldn't tear his eyes away from it as it pulsated and grew larger.

Within the space of a few seconds it had raced close enough to reveal its true form—a starfish-like gelatinous mass of writhing tentacles. Bulbous red and purple arms undulated and pulsed, lashing out toward them.

Now all four walls were dissolved into the chaos as the piping sounds grew ever more frenzied. Ghastly forms exploded from the turbulence only to sink back down again. The behemoth's tentacles reached out to them, whipping around them with screaming ferocity. Adding to the cacophony of noise was an ominous drumbeat that reverberated through the chamber.

"This isn't real," Peter muttered, looking as shaken as Neal felt. "We've been drugged. Some sort of hallucination."

"Then why are we seeing the same thing? Do you see a huge starfish demon?" Neal demanded.

"Yes," he admitted.

A deafening clap of thunder stilled the turbulence and all went black again. The starfish monstrosity disappeared. The pipes, the shrieks, the drums, all fell quiet. The only sound that could be heard was Neal and Peter's heavy breathing.

"You sought me and here I am."

The voice coming out of the void was curiously cultivated, quiet and refined. It was a male voice, deep and resonant with perhaps a hint of an English accent.

"Your activities have not gone unnoticed. I've been watching you. Long have I waited for someone who could challenge me, and you may be the ones. That will be revealed tonight. You have two hours. Two hours to escape this realm. At the end of the two hours if you've not escaped, you will die. If you stay in this chamber, you will certainly die. If you leave, you still may die. But I'm not without mercy. One small sliver of opportunity remains for you to discover. If you manage that, we'll meet again. And yes, you may find what you seek. The Galileo manuscript is here. If you discover it, you may be able to keep it even as it leads to your destruction."

A blast of drums and pipes marked his last words and the room was again ablaze in a turbulent sea of colors. From the wall behind them a rush of hot air assaulted their backs as droplets of hot sticky slime rained down from the ceiling.

Then as soon as it had started, it ended. All became quiet once more. The light show had caused the slime on the walls to glow more brightly and the room was now suffused with green light.

Wiping his face, Neal said, "We've been slimed. Gross. What a revolting smell."

Peter used his hands to wipe down his pants. "At least we had our jackets on. That gave us a little protection." Taking off his windbreaker and turning it inside out, he used it as a rag to dry his face and hair. Handing it to Neal, he added, "You might as well use mine. It's wrecked anyway."

After he'd swiped the worst of the gunk off, Neal felt along the walls. "It's too dark to see the ceiling, but there must be some sort of sophisticated holographic 3D projector mounted to it. That is, if you're looking for a rational explanation. Or you could simply say we'd been transported to the blasphemous demonic world of Azathoth."

"Let's go with 3D projector," said Peter ruefully. "How are you feeling? How's your vision?"
"Still a little blurry. Getting better. How about you? Nausea under control?"

"If I could get away from the stench of the slime, I'd be better," said Peter.

"We both would. Do you believe Azathoth's challenge?"

Peter reflected. "He's insane enough, I think it's possible he means what he says. This whole business has been a setup. The symbol on the manuscript, the hidden messages. He baited us, lured us to his trap. The guy's bored, looking for a challenge—for a certain type of warped personality I suppose that makes sense. So, what do you say? Ready to kick some demon butt?"

"He might as well shrivel away now. He doesn't stand a chance," said Neal. Hey, if Peter could fake bravado, so could he. "Guess we better start with that door."

Peter checked his pockets. "I might have a paperclip that could help."

"Not necessary." Neal bent over. Fingering along the inner seam of his left pant hem, he pulled out a lock pick. "You never know when one of these will come in handy."

"Bet I know who your tailor is," said Peter, smiling with relief. "While you work on the door, I'll check the walls and floor. There may be a hidden escape somewhere else."

The lock was not a simple one. Multiple side wards frustrated matters. Fortunately the pick he had brought was his favorite design and customized to handle this type of lock, but even so it would be a challenge. There, surely that was the last pin. Neal involuntarily let out a groan when he was stopped short by yet one more recalcitrant side guard.

"You okay over there?"

"He's not making it easy," Neal said gritting his teeth. "If this is a sign of things to come, we'll have to be at the top of our game. Any luck on the search?"

"No trap doors that I could find." Peter walked over to Neal. "My eyes are better. That's a comfort. You're no longer pulsating. My stomach thanks you for that."

"Finally got it!" Giving the lock a final twist, Neal opened the door. Turning to Peter, he asked, "Ready to go demon-hunting?"

"Hold on a minute. Let me check you out." Peter took hold of Neal's chin and examined his eyes. "Your pupils are still blown wide—I can barely see your irises," he warned.

"It's dark in here."

"Yeah, but not that dark. Let me feel your pulse . . . Still racing."

Neal checked Peter's. "So is yours. Adrenaline?"

"Maybe, but I bet we're pumped full of whatever drug he used on us. We have no choice but to go forward, but keep that in mind. Also, I can guarantee he's installed video cams throughout the place, so keep your voice low."

"Got it," Neal whispered. "You ready?"

At Peter's nod, they cautiously stepped into a dim corridor. The air was heavy and damp, but at least the stench wasn't as strong. It was faintly lit, enough to show that the walls were dark, with the corridor about four feet wide. It went straight ahead for about thirty feet to an opening where
stairs were faintly visible. There were no doorways leading off the corridor. Coming from the walls were faint gurgling noises which were punctuated with the puffing sounds of escaping steam and always in the background the sound of pipes.

"Only one way to go and that's up the stairs," Peter whispered.

They crept forward together, their eyes darting in all directions.

"Stop!" Neal cried out, flinging out an arm and forcing Peter back just as he was about to take a step.

"What is it?" Peter asked, bewildered.

"Motion detector." Neal pointed out the tiny detector in front of them. "Your foot would have broken the field."

Taking off his belt, he dangled it in front of the detector. Instantly giant circular rotating saws emerged from both sides of the corridor and slashed across before retreating back into the walls. Anyone tripping the field would have been sliced into ribbons.

Ashen, Peter swallowed and nodded his thanks. "I owe you one. Any ideas on how to get past them?"

"There are six saws," Neal said, experimenting with his belt on the field. "Wonder what happens if we sustain the break in the field by holding the belt in place?"

"Give it a try," Peter urged.

This time when the saws darted out to make their deadly sweep, Peter and he both counted seconds to estimate the interval between each pass. They kept it up for several circuits.

"I calculate there's a five-second interval between each repetition," Peter said. "Appears to be constant. The blades are staggered such that it's impossible to run part way and pause between the blades. You have to be able to dash through all six before they repeat."

"I agree." Eyeing Peter, Neal added, "Is that enough time for you to get to the other side?"

"I don't think so," said Peter, shaking his head. "I'm not that good a sprinter. You're a runner. Think you could get through?"

"I could make it, but I'm not leaving you behind," Neal said, not liking what he knew Peter was thinking. If he left Peter behind, no telling what Azathoth would have in store for him. He'd already said to stay in their initial prison would mean certain death.

"You have to," Peter insisted. "Once you're on the other side, you may be able to find a way to turn the damned things off. If you don't go, neither one of us has a chance of escaping. There's no other route to try. We already checked our prison cell and didn't find any other exits."

Laying a hand on Neal's shoulder, he added, "You'll have to do this for both of our sakes, or we might as well quit now."

He had to admit Peter was right. There was no other option. "All right, give me a second." Neal took several deep breaths. Giving Peter a quick one-arm hug, he assumed a three-point stance.

"Ready?" said Peter, and at his nod, dangled the belt through the field. As soon as the blades had
retracted, Neal exploded into a dash, making it to the other side with a second to spare.

His chest heaving with excess energy, he flashed the victory symbol at Peter and started inspecting the walls. Delicately probing the area close to the nearest set of blades, he painstakingly searched for a switch, wire, anything that could stop the blades. Nothing. He then crouched down on the floor and felt along the baseboards. The baseboards were coated in a viscous substance, making it difficult to feel the surface, but finally he found it—a miniature switch almost directly underneath the nearest saw.

"Try it now," he said and watched as Peter tripped the field. Four of the saws came out but not the two closest to Neal. Flashing Peter a grin, Neal crept out to find the switches for the other saws. Now that he knew what to look for, it didn't take long to disable the other saws.

Giving the signal to test it again, Neal watched and waited. This time nothing came out. But the question was could Azathoth reset the saws? Did he have a master panel from where he could control everything? Neal debated telling Peter to hold off. It wasn't worth the risk. But before he could say anything, Peter had already sprinted across.

Breathless, Peter put his hands to his knees as he squatted down. He must have been thinking the same thing.

They nodded at each other. "That makes Good Guys two; Azathoth zero by my reckoning," Neal whispered to Peter.

Chuckling, Peter handed Neal his belt, "You can carve your notches on this when we're outta here."

They warily inched their way down the corridor, watching for other pitfalls, but the rest of the passageway was devoid of traps.

At the foot of the staircase they paused to examine it. The staircase itself was an enclosed narrow and steep spiral, winding up like a corkscrew for perhaps fifty feet. It reminded Neal of a turret staircase in a castle. They had to go single file, Peter taking the lead and followed closely by Neal. The stairs were so tightly wound, they had to bend down to avoid bumping their heads.

The staircase was eerily quiet, the silence broken only by a sporadic flapping of wings. Bats, perhaps? Unseen creatures of the night? In the low light their other senses appeared to be heightened. The slime stench was gone but replacing it was the musty smell of decay, like moldy books in some forgotten library.

At the top of the staircase they were confronted by another locked door, but the lock mechanism on this one was much simpler. It was a matter of seconds for Neal to unlock it. He looked questioningly at Peter.

"Go ahead. Open it," Peter whispered.

Neal cautiously opened the door and they peered into the opening beyond.

The hallway was deserted. It appeared to be an old service corridor, barely three feet wide which extended for about twenty feet, opening into a dimly lit room ahead. At one point the hallway was partially blocked by large wooden beams, but there was enough clearance at the top to climb over without much difficulty.

Neal started down the corridor, closely followed by Peter. Their appearance startled several bats which were roosting in a niche over the door to the staircase. Uttering shrill squeaks of alarm, they
took off in an erratic flight directly over them before disappearing into the room ahead.

Neal quickly ducked then quieted his nerves. "Just bats," he muttered to Peter, "and nothing more."

"Beware the raven perched over the door," Peter warned in a low undertone as he pointed toward the room.

Neal shot a grin at him and drew a check mark in the air.

Peter shrugged. "Gotta keep a sense of humor when out hunting demons."

They'd now reached the wood barricade. Both of them checked it over for hidden sensors, metal spikes, swinging pendulums of death, anything suspicious, but it looked clean. When Neal tested the barricade with his belt to see if electric bolts would shoot through it, nothing happened.

Warily, first with one hand and then more confidently, Neal climbed over the beams and made room for Peter.

But as Peter prepared to climb over, a loud clang shook the corridor.

Crying out as a gaping hole appeared in the floor beneath him, Peter tumbled through the opening even as he flung out his arms to try to stop his fall.

"Peter!" Neal raced back to climb over the barricade. Thwarting his efforts, a metal gate crashed down from the ceiling, nearly slicing off his fingers. Neal hurled himself against the gate but it didn't budge. Through the grill of the gate all he could see was a dark opening in the floor.

"Are you okay? Peter, answer me!" Neal strained his ears but all he could hear was what sounded like the rushing of wind, and then, in the distance, mocking him, the thin sound of a single pipe.

Horrified, he watched as a trap door slid silently over the opening, sealing it shut.

Neal painstakingly felt along every inch of the wall, searching for a switch, a mechanism, anything to raise the gate, but there was nothing. Abandoning that approach, he tackled the gate itself, but the metal was much too strong to be bent. There was no way he could open it.

If he was going to rescue Peter, he'd have to find another route.


"By my calculation, that makes twelve bars of gold-pressed latinum that you now owe me."
Mozzie tapped a finger on the table. "Pay up, Vulcan."

"Hold on. You neglected to include my rescue of the Klingon Chancellor," protested Travis.

"Talking back, 2 slips of latinum," Mozzie muttered as he made a note.

It was now eight o'clock. Coffee had replaced wine. El got up to stretch her legs and walked over to the fireplace. Travis had made a fire and the house must be warm—Mozzie had removed his muffler—but El still felt chilled as she put her hands in the pockets of her sweater. Were Peter and Neal cold too?

El was finding it impossible to focus on the game. She appreciated their efforts to distract her, but as the hours passed, she couldn't make even a pretense of joining in.

Travis's cell phone buzzed. She rushed back to hear what he was saying. It was Tricia. She must
have some news as he mainly listened and nodded.

"What did she say?" El asked as soon as he turned off his cell. "I want every detail." She sat down next to him.

"You remember there were multiple tire tracks by the shack? In addition to those of your car, they were able to identify tires from a cargo van. Agents found an abandoned van with matching tire treads at a beach parking lot about twenty miles away along the parkway. The van was empty and is being searched for evidence."

"Wait—you said it was at a parking lot?" Mozzie stood up, agitated at the news. "That means a helicopter could have landed and carried them off."

"That's what they thought too," Travis confirmed. "Agents have checked with Nassau County flight control, and radar shows a helicopter landed at that location in the afternoon. Officials have only been able to trace its route as far as Manhattan. After that the trail is lost."

"So they could be anywhere." El bit her lower lip and resumed pacing.

"Unfortunately, yes. They're now attempting to get more information on the helicopter," Travis said.

El appreciated that he wasn't trying to sugarcoat it. How could he? She went over to the patio doors and looked out into the night. In the background she heard Mozzie talking on the phone with June. She could tell he was trying to reassure her.

Satchmo came up and rubbed against her leg. Dogs always know when something's wrong. She wondered if she should call Neal's aunt Noelle? But how could she manage it without falling apart? *Wait till morning*, she told herself.

"Peter, come home to me," she whispered into the night.

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Notes: Grateful thanks and an apology to my awesome beta Penna Nomen. She had no idea I'd be dragging her into the demonic realm of Azathoth when she offered to help me on *The Woman in Blue*. The action comes to a head in Chapter 22: *The Seventh Circle*. That chapter may leave you with more questions than answers so I'm going to post it together with Chapter 23: *A Burke Halloween*. Both chapters will be ready for you next Thursday.


Chapter Visuals: *The Woman in Blue* board at the *Caffrey Conversation* Pinterest website: [www.pinterest.com/caffreycon](http://www.pinterest.com/caffreycon)
Okay, take a deep breath. Just because Peter fell through the trapdoor doesn't mean any harm came to him.

Neal considered his options. The route had been laid out by Azathoth. That wasn't a comforting thought, but they hadn't had any choice since this nightmare started. At this point all he could do was continue to the next room.

Focus. Find Peter. Find the manuscript. Escape. Checkmate.

With one last look through the barricade to the now closed trapdoor, Neal proceeded to the room at the end of the hall. It was a faded derelict of what once must have been an elegant dining room. Cobwebs and a thick layer of dust covered an elaborate crystal chandelier. The walls were paneled in carved walnut wainscoting. A couple of mediocre paintings hung on walls covered in faded crimson wallpaper. The massive Victorian furniture was dark and dingy. A few pieces of old china—German, not particularly valuable—and an old tarnished silver-plate tea service were displayed on the sideboard. Closed double doors led off to the right.

Lighting was provided by a couple of rickety sconces on the walls. Either the cords were frayed or the light bulbs were failing. Something was making them flicker on and off.

By now the haunting piping had become so familiar that Neal barely noticed it. What was strange was the faint whistling of wind. There were no windows in the room. He looked around for a vent but couldn't find anything.

And there was something else. He'd first felt it when he entered the room. The sense that someone was watching.

Get a grip, he lectured himself. They'd assumed all along there would be video cameras installed throughout.

But this was different. A presence.

Neal scanned the room. There was no place for someone to hide. Stop wasting time.

Not knowing if he were ever going to be back, he set about to quickly search the room for the manuscript. Knocking on the wainscoting proved fruitless. No hidden panels to discover. Nothing under the dining table or chairs. The sideboard would be too obvious, but it had to be examined. As Neal opened a drawer, the flickering lights in the sconces went out. Damn. He was once more in total darkness.

Neal walked toward the double doors, but he was too late. Before he could open them, something flew overhead, something immense. Judging by the sound its wings made as they flapped, it must be enormous.

An ear-splitting screech rent the air, followed by another and another. Neal flung up his arms to ward off whatever was up there. He could feel the wings graze his hands. Running backward, he strained to see what was above him.

Something slammed into him—hard, powerful—tackling him from behind. Massive hands gripped
his throat, choking him.

Frantically clawing at the hands, Neal kicked at it with his leg. He must have hit something sensitive because the grip on his throat relaxed enough for him to break free. As he spun around, a fist connected with his stomach, making him double over.

Neal staggered backwards, but there was no escape as his assailant rushed him. A bolt of greenish light exploded in the room momentarily revealing who was attacking him. Maybe seven feet tall, built like a gorilla. But that was no gorilla face. What should have been his face was a writhing mass of tentacles. Did he even have eyes?

With a strength brought on by desperation, Neal wrestled with him to break free.

But tentacle-face had a stranglehold once more on Neal's neck. The hands were gripping tighter and tighter. Starved for oxygen, Neal knew he was going to lose consciousness any second. Frantically seizing his clothes, Neal’s hand slipped into its back pocket and felt something hard—a gun.

He pulled out the gun and slammed it into tentacle-face's back but to no avail. The blackness in the room was pulling him down, enveloping him.

In desperation, he fired the gun once, twice into tentacle-face's side.

Letting out a ferocious howl, tentacle-face released his grip and crashed to the floor. No longer supported by the monster, Neal fell to his knees as air began flowing back into his parched lungs. His face and chest had been splattered with blood from the gun shots. The bitter copper smell made his stomach turn.

As far as he could tell, tentacle-face lay motionless. But the screams continued unabated.

An ominous clanking of metal came from somewhere behind Neal. Chains dragging on the floor. And they were getting closer. Neal was too exhausted to look up, too worn out to see who picked him up and hurled him against the wall.

**WCWCWCWCWCWCWCW**

He must have passed out. How long had he been unconscious? Not important. Still alive.

Something was missing. Focus, Caffrey. That was it—the cacophony of screeches was gone. Just intermittent clangs of metal. Breathing in short ragged breaths, Neal gingerly felt his bruised throat. Dazed, he watched as the lights sputtered off and on.

He must have still held the gun when he was attacked because he found it lying next to him. There was no sign of the demon or whoever had flung him across the room, but in the flickering light he could see the shape on the floor by the sideboard wasn't moving. Neal picked up the gun and slowly righted himself. Only bruises. He could still walk.

Cautiously he approached the figure on the floor. Odd. From the glimpses he could obtain from the flickering lights, his attacker no longer seemed as enormous as he remembered.

It must have been his fear which made the attacker seem larger. Wait—he knew those clothes. This wasn't who'd attacked him. With a cry of dismay, Neal raced to the body and turned it over.

"No! It can't be!"
Staring at him with unseeing dead eyes was Peter. Blood covered his head and chest.

With a sob of despair, Neal collapsed beside the body. Dimly his brain registered footsteps approaching from behind, but he didn't care. Peter was dead.

When Peter fell through the trapdoor, he landed with a crash on a steep metal chute. Vainly attempting to stop his fall by clutching the sides, he slid down some thirty feet before being roughly ejected onto the floor.

Where was he? The room was empty, a tiny cave-like interior. A phosphorescent fungus growing on the walls emitted a sickly glow, but otherwise there was no light. A machine-like clanking sound could be heard. And what was that other sound? Escaping steam like from a pressure valve? What kind of machinery was behind the wall?

With a groan Peter felt himself over. He'd been lucky. With the exception of a few bruises, he'd survived the fall intact. More determined than ever to beat Azathoth at whatever sick game he was playing, he got up and looked around for a way out.

There was no obvious opening except for the hole in the ceiling through which he'd fallen. He wouldn't have thought it possible, but the stench had actually increased. Peter felt along for the walls for any crack that might signify an opening. What was Neal doing? Frantically trying to get to him? Like he was now?

His right hand found a narrow crack. Running his fingers along it, he could tell that it went up as far as his hand could reach. Pressing his ear to the crack, he heard a distant rumbling sound. The wall felt hot. He pressed along the wall, trying to find another parallel crack which would denote a door, when without warning the panel gave way and fell backwards with a deafening crash.

A dark tunnel was now revealed, as tall as the ceiling and about four feet wide. A blast of furnace-hot air rushed out from the opening. A track ran along the tunnel disappearing into the distance.

Peter thought the air stank before, but this was far worse. Pinching his nose to try to ward off the stench, he gagged reflexively. In the distance of the tunnel two bright pinpoints of light appeared rapidly approached him with a deafening roar sounding like he was in a subway tunnel. There was no other exit.

No choice but to enter the tunnel, even though all his senses were telling him not to. If he entered, he'd be run over by the oncoming locomotive, train or whatever the hell it was.

Testing the heat at the entrance with his hand, it was so intense he felt his hand would be scalded. What must it be like inside?

The lights hurtled ever closer. Over the roar he heard an insanely haunting *Tekeli-li! Tekeli-li!*

Knowing this was madness but with no viable option, Peter charged into the tunnel.

Peter was braced for a grotesque demon, for scorching heat, for asphyxiating fumes. . . . Hell for all he knew he was going to be crushed by an oncoming locomotive. He thought he was ready for anything. He'd steeled himself to confront whatever Azathoth threw at him, but he was not prepared for what was waiting for him . . .

. . . which was nothing.
As soon as he entered the tunnel, the tracks, the lights, everything disappeared. He was in an empty corridor. The roaring had stopped. Even the smell had lessened. There was residual heat but it too was quickly dissipating.

"What devilry is this?" he muttered as he staggered along the corridor. A narrow stairway awaited him at the end of the corridor.

Wiping the sweat off his brow, he started up the stairs.

This staircase extended up for two flights at least. Aside from a periodic metallic clanging and the ever prevalent sound of escaping steam it was quiet. Peter walked up the stairs slowly and cautiously, expecting another trap door to open up at any moment. Azathoth was using Lovecraft for inspiration. That tunnel was straight out of *At the Mountains of Madness*. What alien monstrosity was lurking for him in the next chamber?

The quiet was giving him time to regain his equilibrium and prepare for what Azathoth had in store next. And that made him nervous. Why wasn't he pressing home his advantage?

The door at the top of the stairs was locked. With no lock pick, and who knows if he could have gotten it unlocked anyway, Peter resorted to brute force. Flinging himself against the door, he discovered it was far less sturdy than it looked. A few minutes and one bruised shoulder later, he broke through.

The room he found himself in was of cavernous proportions with a high arched ceiling. Amber beams of light were focused on the ceiling from devices on tables. The room had no occupants, human or otherwise. Closed double doors were at the other end of the room. Peter went over to the doors and listened at the crack. A faint sound was coming from the other room—was that sobbing?

Warily, Peter opened the doors. It appeared to be a dining room. At the opposite end, a figure was crumpled on the ground.

Forgetting caution, Peter raced toward him. "Neal, are you okay?"

Neal stood up hastily and stared at Peter in horror. His face and clothes were covered in blood. Neal was armed, a gun in his right hand. He was aiming straight at Peter and held up a trembling left hand to warn him off. He croaked in a rough whisper, "You're not real. Stay back."

"You better believe I'm real. What happened?" Mindful of his wild-eyed, terrified stare, Peter slowed to a careful walk as he talked quietly, reassuringly, "It's me, Peter. You're safe now. You can put the gun down." He spread his hands low, palms down.

Neal backed away from Peter, his face haunted in the flickering light. "Please don't. Don't make me. I already killed you once. Just go." He stared down at the gun in horror, his hands shaking noticeably.

Peter couldn't chance any more delay. He took advantage of Neal glancing at his weapon to rush him and pry it from his unresisting fingers.

The next moment he was grabbed in a tight hug as Neal flung himself at him with a sob. "You're dead. I killed you. Peter, I'm so sorry." he whispered, his voice sounding painfully rough.

"Hey, buddy, I'm here breathing and doing just fine, just a little worse for wear, and probably not smelling too good." Peter tried to reassure him, awkwardly patting him. "Whatever you think happened didn't, obviously. Let me check you out." Gently disengaging himself from Neal's desperate grip, he asked, "Were you shot? You're bleeding. I need to find out where."
Neal was too unsteady to stay on his feet so Peter guided him to one of the chairs. Pulling up another one, he sat opposite him. He put his hands on Neal's shoulders to prevent him from sagging forward.

"Not my blood—yours, or whoever it was. Monster? Demon? Size of a gorilla. Face all tentacles. Was choking me . . . couldn't breathe. Got its gun . . . shot it. But then . . . when I went back . . . it was you. You lying on the ground, dead . . . blood . . . I killed you."

His words weren't making any sense. Neal was on the verge of hyperventilating as he relived his attack.

"Easy there—not me, remember. I'm here. Deep, slow breaths. This is all Azathoth's doing. Mind tricks, that's all. It wasn't real." What devilry had Azathoth done? This had become personal. Tamping down the anger exploding within him, he examined Neal's neck. It was red and swollen from the stranglehold. The bruises were already forming.

"Good thing you were able to break free. By the looks of that bruising, the thing that attacked you almost crushed your windpipe." Peter continued to talk in low, quiet tones as he wiped the blood off Neal's face with an old frayed runner from the table.

Neal was slowly pulling himself together. He no longer looked as shattered, but his breathing was short and ragged. "What about you?" he rasped. "What happened?"

"Encounter with a train that wasn't," Peter said shortly. He needed to get Neal to a doctor, but the only way to do that was to escape Azathoth's house of horror. How much time had elapsed? They must be getting close to the two-hour deadline.

"You think you can continue? We gotta keep moving if you can. I hate to make you, but we're on the clock." As he talked the metal clanging sound increased in volume.

Looking around, Neal nodded shakily. "Yeah, let's get outta this room. Outta this nightmare. What's through the doors?"

Peter helped Neal up and kept a steadying arm on his back as they walked back. Trying to lighten the mood, Peter said, "A room meant for Mozzie. I knew we should have brought him along. He'd be rubbing his hands with glee over what's there."

"He never would have survived the fumes." Neal scoffed, his voice a rough croak. "At the first whiff of that slime, he'd have passed out."

"Not us, slick. I'm beginning to think after tonight you may be ready to be initiated into the M.I.B. ranks after all."

"I knew there were hidden levels at the FBI," Neal whispered triumphantly. Good. Peter's attempts at humor appeared to be having the desired effect.

They reentered the chamber. It was sparsely furnished with old-fashioned settees along the walls. Two tall casement windows with long velvet curtains were along one wall. In the center were five narrow tables set in a pentagon shape with a diameter of roughly ten feet. On each table was an apparatus of spherical rings resembling an armillary sphere. A light beam was projected from the center of each sphere onto a ceiling mural of grapevines with bunches of grapes and foliage.

This was Neal's first time to see it, and Peter's first opportunity to study the room. "It's a giant puzzle!" Neal stared at the ceiling in wide-eyed fascination.
"Yes, and our first chance to escape." Peter went to the windows and looked outside. It was dark outside but he could make out the outline of trees. Feeling around the casements, he couldn't find a way to open the windows. "Looks like we'll have to break the glass to escape. I could use one of those tables to smash the glass."

"Wait. We can't leave. We haven't found the manuscript yet," Neal pleaded hoarsely, looking at Peter with desperate eyes. "The game's not over. We can't let him win."

Dare they risk it? Peter studied Neal. His eyes were badly dilated, but he appeared alert and in control. The puzzle was allowing him to focus, at least temporarily, on something other than the horror he'd just experienced.

"All right," he said. "Let's work this puzzle, but we have to be quick. You make sense out of the ceiling while I work on the spheres." Peter studied the apparatus in front of him. It looked oddly familiar. All the spheres were alike as far as he could tell. He gingerly nudged a ring on one of them and the beam of light moved slightly as well. That's when it came to him.

"Neal, these are versions of the seventh Apian wheel! I know how to work it. We need to project Jupiter and the four moons into some sort of alignment on the ceiling. How are you coming with the ceiling?"

"I knew we could solve it!" Neal was breathing in short, raspy breaths as he paced back and forth under the ceiling. "Hidden in the vines are symbols for the planets."

"Where? I don't see any."

"See that bunch of grapes in the northeast corner? Now look just to the right. Isn't that the symbol for Saturn?"

Moving closer to where Neal was pointing, Peter peered up at the mural. Damn, Neal's eyes were good. Even dilated, they were a lot better than his. "I think I see what you mean."

"And there's the symbol for Jupiter in the southwest quadrant."

"What about symbols for the moons? We need to find four to correspond to the four moons of Jupiter Galileo drew."

"Don't they use Greek letters to denote moons? Alpha for the first one and so on? Some of those grapevine tendrils could be Greek letters."

"That's a stretch," Peter said doubtfully.

"I'm sure of it." Neal croaked, grimacing as he tried to clear his throat.

Peter exhaled. He still wasn't convinced but he didn't have any other solution and time was running out. "All right, this is our best and maybe only chance. Point out that symbol of Jupiter to me again."

While Neal pointed, Peter started moving the rings of one sphere. It was delicate work aligning all the rings to direct the light beam properly and his fingers kept slipping, but guided by Neal's instructions, he finally was able to move the beam into position.

When the light beam struck the symbol of Jupiter, the room shook as a deafening metallic clang rang out. What sounded like giant rusted metal gears reverberated. Tremors shook the floor.
"We gotta keep moving," Peter shouted. "Where's that alpha symbol you found?"

They moved frantically to position the light beams as the tremors continued. With each light beam that was positioned correctly, the tremors increased in intensity. "If we don't get this finished now," Peter yelled over the din. "We'll have to leave. The devices won't stay in place."

"Almost there. We found beta and gamma. Only delta left. I can find it." Eyes focused on the ceiling mural, Neal paced back and forth. "There! Next to the leaf. That has to be it."

Peter looked at where Neal was pointing. A tiny tendril was sticking out from the leaf. It was impossible to see the delta shape. Was that it? He was going to have to rely on Neal.

"If you say so, good enough for me," Peter said, and moving the rings of the final sphere into position, he shone the beam on the tendril Neal indicated.

When the light hit the tendril, a loud bang shook the room and a hidden compartment about three feet square opened in the floor in the center of the pentagon of tables. Startled, Neal took a panicked leap backward to get out of the way and then fell to his knees to look inside. Peter climbed under the tables to join him. They peered into the cavity and saw a leather portfolio case.

With an exhausted grin, Neal reached inside and pulled it out. The Galileo manuscript was inside. They'd won.

Well, maybe not quite yet. Azathoth wasn't finished with them.

An explosion rocked the chamber, followed by secondary crashes. The splintering of wood could be heard as the walls themselves began to shake.

They raced to one of the windows and flung an end table through the glass. Quickly kicking out pieces of glass with his foot, Peter was finally able to breathe the fresh air from outside. They looked outside and discovered they were about forty feet off the ground in a tall stone house. Woods surrounded a cleared area around the house. There were no other buildings or houses to be seen.

The house continued to be rocked by explosions with a ceiling beam crashing to the floor behind them.

Neal started tearing down the velvet curtains. "We can use this as a rope," he croaked, as he ripped the curtains into narrow strips and knotted them together.

"Curtains won't hold our weight," Peter said worriedly as he joined Neal in making the rope.

"I know but it will help. I'll tie one end of the rope to that steam radiator next to the window. When you go down, I'll help support the rope. It will hold."

"But how will you get down?"

"I can use the cracks in the masonry as holds. Between them and the rope, I'll make it."

"It's too risky."

"We don't have a choice. Trust me, Peter. I can do it."

The walls were collapsing behind them. Neal was right—there was no other option. Peter nodded and moved to the edge of the window.
"Wait." Neal passed him the manuscript. "Your clothes aren't as wrecked as mine. You take this."

Peter took the portfolio and wedged it inside his shirt. Laying an arm on Neal's shoulder, he said, "I better see you climbing down right after me."

"You will," Neal reassured him. "Now go."

Gingerly Peter climbed out of the window and started down. Neal was right. He found some toeholds and chinks in the masonry as he went down that helped steady him. Neal had braced himself against the window frame and held the rope firm. As Peter descended he could see the floors below engulfed in flames. The house was being consumed by fire and explosions. The rope extended almost all the way to the ground and he was able to leap the last few feet.

"Okay, your turn," he shouted and saw Neal climb on to the edge of the window, giving a final yank to the rope. But as Neal started to climb down, he froze. Staring straight down, his eyes enormous, he appeared paralyzed with a look of terror etched on his face.

"Neal, what are you waiting for? Keep moving!" Peter's shouts grew ever more frantic as Neal seemed totally oblivious to him. Flames were rising up behind him. Before long they would start eating at the rope.

"Neal, whatever you're seeing, it's not real. You've gotta trust me. Listen to me. Climb down now!" Peter ordered, the panic raw in his voice.

Finally, after what seemed an eternity, Neal responded to his voice and jerked his head as if awakening from a dream. Nodding shakily at Peter, he started down.

After about ten feet, the rope slipped and loosened. Neal slid several feet till his right foot found a toehold. The radiator must have been pulled out of the floor. A series of deafening explosions went off in the chamber above them and the rope fell to the ground.

Neal felt his way down several more feet, somehow finding enough crevices to cling to. Then, looking over his shoulder and calculating the distance, leapt gracefully the last fifteen feet to the ground. Peter was standing just below to catch him if necessary and help him up.

"Told you I'd make it," he gasped.

"Did you have to be so dramatic?" Peter said as he wrapped his arms around him. "C'mon, it's not safe here." They took off at a run as a chunk of masonry landed five feet away. Behind them the entire house was ablaze with flames lighting up the sky and collapsed walls crashing behind them.

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Notes: How much of their ordeal was real and how much was drug-induced hallucination? That's what Peter and Neal are asking themselves and you probably have the same questions. See Chapter 23: A Burke Halloween for a better understanding of what Azathoth was up to. Many thanks to Penna Nomen for serving as my life rope for Azathoth's house of horror. She deserves many chapters of fluff to make up for it.

Blog: Penna Nomen & Silbrith Conversation: www.pennasilbrithconversation.blogspot.com
Chapter Visuals: The Woman in Blue board at the Caffrey Conversation Pinterest website: www.pinterest.com/caffreycon
"How much of that was real?" Neal asked, taking a sip of tea laced with honey to ease his bruised throat.

He was sitting with Peter on the Burkes' patio enjoying the warmth of the late afternoon sun. It was a mild Indian summer day, and neither one of them had wanted to be inside. Being in the open air made the events of the previous night seem all the more unbelievable.

"Hard to say for sure." Peter was sprawled on one of the patio chairs and had put his feet up on a second one. Aside from slightly singed hair from the "subway tunnel" he showed no physical effects from the previous night. "The toxicology report showed that both of us had significant amounts of hallucinogens in our systems. Apparently Azathoth used an undocumented exotic cocktail. Last time I checked they hadn't identified all the chemicals in the mixture. Your dose was much higher than mine. It must have been when you were attacked. There were traces of it in the blood on your shirt. I suspect when you lost consciousness they doused you with more. Do you remember the doctors telling you that was pig's blood on your clothes?"

"Seriously?"

He nodded. "It was all staged. The gun you held was loaded with blanks. That thing who assaulted you? We believe it was some brute in an elaborate disguise with concealed blood packets which spurted out when you thought you shot him. If you hadn't shot him, he probably would have sprayed it over you anyway."

Peter's jaw hardened as he explained the attack, his face stiffening. Looking at Peter's grim expression, Neal felt once more those massive fingers on his throat, the stench of his breath, the body on the floor, Peter's face...

"Hey, sorry," Peter tapped him on his knee. "Plenty of time later to go over this stuff. How about you helping me shop for a replacement suit next week?"

"You won't try to resurrect your old one? Thank you, Peter! I know what a major concession this is for you." Neal took another sip of tea. "It's not surprising no one would stop to give us a lift. Between the slime and the blood, we must have looked like zombies seeking another meal. How many cars passed us? Three?"

"At least. By the time we happened on that police car we were such a pitiful sight, anyone with a heart would have stopped."

"I had no idea the backwoods of New Jersey could be so isolated. We must have walked on that country road for two miles before finding the highway."

Elizabeth walked out on the patio and dropped extra blankets on both of them. "I was able catch a glimpse of your clothes before they were carried away for analysis. It was a good thing they'd already cleaned you up before I saw you. I was already in such a state, if I'd seen your ruined clothes, they would have put me over the edge. Those patrol officers have earned my undying gratitude for finding you. When I got that call from you in their car..." Shaking her head, El bit back the words.
Peter leaned over to pat her hand. "It's okay, hon. You were there with the doctors. All we need is a little rest."

She looked at them with concern. "I'm not all convinced you feel well enough to be out of bed. And Neal, don't you dare tell me you're fine. I can see your neck."

"Tea and honey working wonders, El." Neal cleared his throat and tried valiantly not to sound quite so much like a frog. "The doctors said everything would heal in about a week. The anti-inflammatories are doing their job, and they said talking would help keep my throat from seizing up."

The phone rang inside the house. Giving Peter strict instructions to stay put, El left to answer it.

Neil looked around the garden in contentment. He supposed he should get up, but it was too peaceful, too relaxing, and he was getting sleepy again. Why should he be nodding off? He'd slept all day. Those muscle relaxants were stronger than he realized. But it was . . .

He must have drifted off. El's voice roused him. "Peter, it's Reese Hughes. You feel up to talking with him?"

Peter left to take the call, and El sat down in his place.

"Sorry I missed seeing Mozzie. When did he come over?" Neal asked.

"Late morning. You and Peter both were sleeping so soundly, he ordered me not to wake you. Mozzie is a good friend. He stayed with me all afternoon and evening until we got the call from the police. Travis was here too. They were both very sweet."

Neal pushed himself up in the lounge chair to keep himself more alert. "Mozzie likes you. That's a privilege to be welcomed into his inner circle."

"I'm honored, and he really helped pass the time. He brought a stack of board games, many of which I'd never seen."

"Did you play Candy Land?"

"No, Star Trek: Warp 9."

"That's one of his favorites. He must have been ecstatic to find new players. I hope he didn't cheat too much."

"I think he took pity on us," El said with a laugh. "Travis is quite the Star Trek fan too. Mozzie warmed up to him, by the way. They bonded over a comparison of Russian versus American listening devices. By the end of it, I think Mozzie had quite forgiven him for being a suit."

Peter came back out on the patio. "El, could I speak with you inside?"

When El left, Satchmo came over and put his head on Neal's lap. "Just you and me, Satch," Neal said with a yawn. "How 'bout a nap?"

The sound of the patio door woke him as El and Peter came back outside. "White Collar surviving without us?" Neal asked, sitting up straighter.

"Hughes sends his regards, and the latest news on our mystery mansion. By the time the fire was extinguished, the house had been reduced to a shell of crumbling masonry walls. They're still
combing through the ruins for evidence, a process which will continue for the next few days. Fortunately there's no rain in the forecast. Preliminary findings indicate dynamite laced with aluminum powder was the primary explosive."

"How about the manuscript? Did it check out?"

"Yes, good news on that front. It appears we got away with the prize and it's the real thing."

"That's a relief." Neal yawned and tried to look more enthusiastic. He suspected it wasn't his best acting job.

"We should let you sleep."

"No, I'm wide awake." At Peter's scoff of disbelief, he added, "Just getting rid of excess carbon dioxide from the fumes last night. What else did Hughes have to say?"

"He ordered us in no uncertain terms not to report for work till Wednesday at the earliest. You and I are on mandatory medical leave till we pass our checkups on Tuesday. In the meantime we have two options to consider. One, we can stay here and enjoy Halloween this weekend."

"No ghosts and goblins at the door for me," Neal interrupted. "I'll hide out in June's loft under the covers."

"That's not one of the options," Peter said sternly. "We're both supposed to be under observation and Mozzie doesn't count as a reputable observer. The alternative I have in mind is for you to join us for a Burke Halloween tradition."

"And just what kind of tradition is that? Is deviled ham involved?" Neal asked suspiciously.

"No it's not, but that's an excellent suggestion. I may have to refine the tradition."

"Hiding under the covers is sounding better and better."

"Wait till you hear about it," El said as she handed him a fresh cup of tea, "you're going to like it. This tradition is a long-standing one. It goes back to when Peter was a child."

At those words Neal perked up. The chance to fill in another one of the blanks in his knowledge about Peter was irresistible.

"You can thank my brother Joe for this one," Peter said. "The Joe you met last spring has mellowed a lot from when we were kids. You know there's a ten-year difference between the two of us, right? When Joe was a teenager, he was a world-class tease and practical jokester. Halloween must have been invented for him. There I was a wide-eyed kid, ready to believe anything my big brother told me, and man, did he invent some whoppers." Peter chuckled at the memories.

"I'm having a hard time picturing you as ever having been gullible," Neal said.

"That's because of all the excellent training Joe gave me. I guess I should be more grateful. Anyway when I was around seven and Joe a know-it-all teenager of seventeen, he filled my head with ghost stories at Halloween. Throughout the week leading up to Halloween he repeatedly warned me about the witches who'd be flying around at night. As I recall, he even left an old broomstick by the front door for me to find and claimed it was a witch who'd dropped it off. Our house was now marked for the witches to descend upon us, which they surely would at midnight on Halloween. I went trick-or-treating with the other kids, but then late that night I snuck out the back door. It was a mild night and the stars were bright in the dark sky. Bundled up in my heaviest
jacket and stocking cap, I spread a blanket on the ground and kept watch for witches. I was determined to see them zoom in on their broomsticks. Mom saw me outside around ten. At first she tried to shoo me inside to go to bed, but I was unshakeable.

"That I can understand," El said. "When Peter decides to do something, he can't be dissuaded."

"He's our rock," Neal croaked approvingly as he and El exchanged knowing looks.

Darting a quick glance at Neal, a smile flitting over his face, Peter resumed the story. "Mom wound up joining me. She made hot cocoa for the two of us, and together we stayed up looking at the sky for witches. It was the first time I had looked at the stars for so long. We weren't finding any witches, so we started making our own patterns out of the star groups in the sky. I didn't know what the constellations were. She knew a few of them—the Big Dipper, Orion—and we made up the others.

"Midnight came and no, we never saw any witches, but the experience got me hooked on stargazing. And since then whenever possible I like to go stargazing for witches on Halloween. Halloween's this Sunday. We're not due back in the office till Tuesday. What do you say to coming up to the cabin with us? I didn't get a chance to show you my telescope last time. It's supposed to be clear this weekend with dark skies. We could go stargazing both Saturday and Sunday."

"I can make my signature Halloween cauldron of beef stew—very easy on the throat—and ample supplies of hot chocolate to get through the night," El added. "We could carve jack-o'-lanterns. I'd love to see what kind you'd carve."

The only time Neal had been to the Burkes' cabin in the Catskills was last spring. Back then he'd been a mess from the flood of returning memories about the abuse he'd suffered as a child, memories that had been brought on by an overdose of the Flashback drug. The Burkes, his aunt Noelle and cousin Henry had bundled him up in a rented van for the journey. The trip there was still a blur. But the experience at the cabin was one he'd never forget. Not only had Noelle helped him deal with the memories, but the experience of being in the woods was glorious. He and Henry had sledded down the hills. He'd painted. The woods were beautiful and brought peace. He'd arrived shattered but left whole again. After the experiences of the past month, he could use a little more healing.

Neal hadn't talked with Peter since Thursday night about what happened with his attacker. That memory of Peter dead on the floor was still too hauntingly vivid. He kept looking over at Peter to reassure himself he really was all right while hoping he wouldn't notice. Being alone in his loft was not something he felt ready for.

When Peter told him at the hospital that he was going to their place to recuperate, Neal felt like he should protest just out of principle and good manners. They didn't need him intruding on their lives, but he couldn't bring himself to say it. And Peter seemed to understand, without him having to explain. Peter got him. That thought had initially scared him, but not now.

"But I shouldn't crash your party," he protested weakly, while inside he was moonwalking.

"You'd be a welcome addition," El said. "Besides if you came up, I could let you two stargaze while I sit by the fire and watch a movie. I bought the DVD of *Pride and Prejudice* but haven't had a chance to watch it yet. This would be the perfect opportunity."

Peter beamed. "Then it's all decided. I've already checked with my parents. No one else has reserved the cabin. We'll leave tomorrow morning and have an old-fashioned Halloween, Burke style!"
"Azathoth's gonna pay," said Peter as he tightened his arm around El. They were sitting in front of the fire. Neal had already gone to bed. El had curled up on the couch next to him.

It was their first real opportunity to talk about what had happened the previous night. He'd avoided it as much as possible while Neal was around. Peter knew he wasn't ready to relive the ordeal.

"What he put Neal through, what he put you through . . ." Peter stopped, not wanting to reveal the extent of his anger.

"I shouldn't have asked about it, hon," El said, the concern evident in her face. "You don't need to talk about it."

"No, it helps, but I don't want to make you upset," Peter said, taking a deep breath. "His time's coming. I promise you that. You know, that was one of the hardest aspects for me when Neal related the abuse he'd suffered as a child. The abuser was already dead. There was nothing I could do. No action I could take. But with Azathoth it's different."

"You two are safe. Let's focus on that for right now." El shrugged off his arm. "Here, let me massage those stiff muscles in your neck."

"You give the best neck massages," Peter said as he sighed in pleasure.

"And tell me, how many others have massaged your neck?" El joked as she gave him a kiss. "That's better. I've missed that smile."

"Okay, no more talk about Azathoth tonight," Peter said as he melted into the massage. "Thanks for agreeing to the road trip. I didn't give you very much warning."

"It was a wonderful idea. You and Neal both need time to recover. I've noticed how he keeps looking over at you."

"He whose name I won't mention gave him one horrific nightmare of an experience. I hope a Burke Halloween will go a long way in undoing the damage."

**On the road. October 30, 2004. Saturday morning.**

And so on a bright Indian summer morning Neal set off with Peter and El for the Burke family cabin in the Catskills.

They'd stopped off at Neal's loft for a few supplies on the way. Despite Peter's guarantee they had plenty of extra parkas, gloves and winter socks, Neal wasn't taking any chances and rifled through his drawers for his warmest clothes. Good thing he'd gotten those ski pants he found on sale so he wouldn't have to resort to Peter's thermal underwear. Peter wasn't being any help at all during his frenzied preparations. "Cowboy up" was getting awfully worn around the edges.

Mozzie had already done a good job in clearing out the clutter of Apian wheels. Neal was relieved to see his loft had almost returned to normal, minus a few more bottles of wine.

When they left, their trunk loaded with enough gear for a month, Peter drove with El beside him in front. Neal was in the back seat with Satchmo and a few extra pillows El had tossed in.

Their route took them over the George Washington Bridge. "This ride is much more peaceful than last time."
Peter gave him a sharp look through the rear view mirror as he quickly slowed down. "You haven't been on the bridge since Frank Harper kidnapped you?"

"No reason to. Have I mentioned how much I prefer your driving to that of a doped-out murderer?"

"Good reminder for me to drive extra carefully. I don't ever want to have a repetition of you crashing into the Hudson."

"Thank you. It's not high on my list of do-overs either." In the bright sunshine Neal was feeling too comfortable to be concerned. It seemed longer than two months ago that he'd been tracking down a lost Fabergé egg. His classes hadn't started. Mansfeld hadn't returned to haunt him. At least he hadn't had any more drownings since then. Things were looking up. He turned from the window to see Peter studying him through the rearview mirror, and gave him a smile. "Satchmo and I are totally relaxed, aren't we, boy?" and he patted Satchmo's head.

The three-hour drive passed quickly with them taking turns driving and napping.

When Neal awoke from his second nap—or was it his third?—El was at the wheel. They'd left the suburbs far behind and were driving through woodlands. Fall had arrived late this year, and many of the trees still retained their fall foliage. The autumnal palette of softly fading russets, mauve, and ochre made him itch to get out his paints. He tried to capture the colors, the mood, in his memory to resurrect later.

Peter passed him a bottle of water from the cooler. "Almost there," he said.

Neal looked at his watch and it was already two o'clock. "After all the sleep I've been getting, I'm ready for a night of stargazing."

"Have you ever used a telescope?" Peter asked.

"Never, this will be a new life experience. And to have it be a Peter Burke original, I'm stoked. When did you make it?"

"When I was a freshman in college. I'd made a smaller one when I was a teenager. I was able to use the college facilities to grind the mirror. That was the hardest part. It took weeks and weeks to grind and polish it."

"We'll be close to the cabin for this, right?" asked Neal.

"Not too far. We'll take it up the hill south of the cabin away from the trees. We need an unobscured view."

"Good—far away from the trees is wise," Neal seconded quickly. "Shouldn't we be on a platform?"

"Why do you say that?" El asked.

"Not so easy for bears, you know. Or wolves. Do you have wolves in the area? How is Satchmo at bear protection?" Responding to their laughter, he added, "Hey, I can't help it if I'm a city slicker."

"You mean you're not Daniel Boone? I'm shocked," Peter quipped. "I guess you were asleep when the warning about bears was broadcast on the radio. The state forestry service has issued an alert to be on the lookout."

"You're kidding, right?" Neal frowned at Peter's face in the rearview mirror. "El, tell me he's pulling my leg."
Punching her husband lightly in the arm, she said, "Peter, you're awful. Scaring our tenderfoot in the back seat. Neal, the only bear you're going to see around the cabin is Peter's old teddy bear. There are occasional reports but they're very infrequent."

Peter grinned, not in the least remorseful. "I couldn't resist. You remind me of what I was like . . . when I was six."

"Not my fault. I didn't go the Boy Scout route when I was growing up and never learned about bears and wolves."

"No, you should have had me back then to teach you about wildlife."

"Yeah," Neal said softly. "That would've been nice."

Peter continued as if he'd read his mind. "But when your big brother is a tease, you can't always count on him to tell you the straight story. When we were driving to the cabin—I must have been about five or six—Joe pulled the same trick on me. We were sitting in the back seat, and he told me how there'd been a report on the radio about bears running amok around our cabin. Mom was asleep and Dad was listening to the game and didn't hear him. Joe had me so scared I didn't want to get out of the car when we arrived. I started crying and he had to confess. My parents kept him so busy with chores throughout the weekend he had no more time for practical jokes."

Neal laughed. "Is that supposed to be comforting that I'm as green as you were when you were five? I need to sign up for wilderness boot camp."

"Great idea!" Peter seconded enthusiastically. "I'll work on that for another trip. I can see it now . . . January, after a snowstorm. We can build a shelt—"

"That was a joke, Peter. Put it out of your mind," Neal interrupted hastily.

"Too late," El said. "He'll never forget. Your doom is already sealed."

Was the guy a polar bear? What was this infatuation with cold weather? Time to change the subject before Peter got even more carried away. "I should warn Noelle about Joe's proclivities."

"Oh, you don't have to worry about that," said El. "Joe's a reformed man. That's what marriage and children will do for you. Helping him along were his daughters who played more practical jokes than he ever did."

"I still owe him, though," said Peter. "Remind me to tell you sometime about his Bigfoot prank. But that story has to wait till it's winter. You need snow. Lots of snow. Maybe during wilderness boot camp."

"You know my course load will be unusually heavy this winter. Classes every day. A real shame I won't have any time for boot camp."

"I have Columbia's schedule. There's always winter break."

Neal looked out the window at the woods whizzing by. "Isn't that the marker for your road up ahead?"

"Yep, almost there." Peter said.

Satchmo seemed to know and barked his approval. Peter turned off the county road onto a small rural lane. When Neal had been here in March, there was still snow on the ground. The cabin and
woods now looked like a Frederic Church painting, the brilliant sun illuminating the foliage of the woods into iridescent splashes of color. It made him excited to go exploring.

As they rounded the bend to the cabin, Neal noticed a red pickup parked in front of the cabin.

"Isn't that Joe's truck?" El asked. "Why's he here?"

"Dunno. Maybe he came to see us or do some maintenance? Mom said no one else had reserved the cabin."

They walked inside. "Hey, Joe, you here?" Peter called out. There was no answer. "He may be down by the boathouse. Let's go ahead and stow our gear."

Neal helped Peter carry in a large ice chest of food. El had already made up their dinner so she wouldn't have to cook that night.

Neal opened the fridge to store the food and paused. Scanning the contents, he called out, "Peter, there may be something else going on."

Peter and El came over as Neal pulled out a bottle of champagne. "Do you normally stock the fridge with champagne?"

"Not normally, and this is the expensive stuff—French," Peter said, looking confused.

"Not just French—Dom Perignon," Neal noted. "Fresh fruit, ham, Gruyère . . . "

El added, "There's also a loaf of fresh French bread from the farmer's market on the counter."

"This calls for an investigation," Peter said. "I'm checking upstairs."

He came back down a few minutes later, grinning from ear to ear. "Behold exhibit B," he said as he displayed a diaphanous pink chemise.

El reached behind the sofa and pulled up a pair of navy high heels. "And exhibit C."

Peter rubbed his hands together. "My brother's having a tryst! The sneak. He didn't let anyone know."

"This better be Noelle, or Joe will be in for a world of hurt from the Caffreys," Neal added.

El smiled mischievously. "Peter, you do realize this is your perfect chance for revenge?"

"Is there time? We'd need to work fast. It'll be dark before very long so they'll have to come back soon. I could call the police and report suspicious behavior. I know the local sheriff. He'd play along."

"That'd be too cruel," El objected. "We can't be that mean."

"Yeah, I guess," Peter said regretfully. "And a waste of police resources, but it's tempting."

Neal was rummaging through the kitchen drawers. He pulled out a basting brush. That should work. A pot of strawberry jam—perfect.

"What are you thinking?" asked Peter.

"You talked about bears. That wasn't all a joke, right? They are known to occur around here?"
"Yeah, every year we have one or two reports."

"What if we made Joe think there were bears inside the cabin? A reverse Goldilocks?" He could see Peter's brain working. "We could hide your car, I could paint a few bear prints with this jam, say on the fridge, outside the door."

"I could scatter some cans in the kitchen," El added, "and open up the trash bin outside. Peter, this could work."

"We need to act fast," Peter reminded them. "I'll go hide the car. Neal, you start painting. If we can pull this off, you've just earned your first merit badge."

Notes: Please join me next Thursday for the final chapter of The Woman in Blue. Penna Nomen was a fantastic co-conspirator for the Reverse Goldilocks maneuver. I'm betting that Neal will earn that merit badge.

The events concerning Neal's childhood abuse and his first trip to the Burke family cabin are covered in Caffrey Flashback. Joe Burke makes his first appearance and meets Noelle in the same story. Neal's adventure on the George Washington Bridge is part of The Golden Hen (the prequel to this story).

If you'd like to see what Noelle and Joe look like, they're pinned to The Woman in Blue board on our Caffrey Conversation Pinterest site at www.pinterest.com/caffreycon. There's also a pin of the Frederic Church painting Neal refers to when he arrives at the cabin.

Noelle strolled arm in arm with Joe back from the lake. She took delight in the rustling sound the carpet of fallen leaves made as she walked. The late afternoon sun was warm on her face. Somewhere bluebirds must be singing because she hadn't felt such bliss in years.

That she, Noelle Caffrey Winslow—PhD in psychology, member of the Winston-Winslow Board of Directors, a professor whose son was now an adult and usually acted like one—would now be feeling like a lovestruck teenager should be highly amusing. Instead she found herself wanting to burst out in song like Julie Andrews in *The Sound of Music*.

In lieu of singing, Noelle leaned her head on Joe's shoulder and savored his solid warmth. Smiling at her, he gave her a kiss. "Your hair looks like spun gold in the sun. Is my fair lady happy?" he asked.

Stopping on the trail, she held his face in her hands, "More than I dreamed possible. Do you know how much I love you, Joseph Burke?"

"If it's a tenth of the love I have for you, I'll be more than content."

"Must we go back?"

"It'll be getting dark soon," he said regrettfully. "Besides, the champagne's on ice. It's time to celebrate! The cabin is just past the bend up ahead."

Noelle glanced around the trail. A couple of squirrels were chasing each other up a tree. Were they in love too? A woodpecker could be heard tapping on a tree off in the distance. The woods were so different from when she'd been here in early March. Then, snow covered the ground. She had been here to help Neal sort through his memories of a childhood trauma. She little realized that a chance meeting with Peter's brother would change her life so profoundly.

They rounded the bend and she spotted the cabin. She also felt Joe tense up. "Something wrong?"

"The door's ajar. Did I forget to close it?" he said, looking worried.

"I don't think so."

"I'm sure I locked it, but I have to admit my mind was elsewhere."

"Bet I can guess on what! Don't be concerned. Maybe a gust of wind blew the door open."

"Yeah, that's probably it." Joe looked unconvinced and picked up his pace.

As they approached the cabin, they noticed some scattered paper and a champagne bottle on the ground. "Uh-oh," said Joe. "Looks like an animal's gotten into the trash."

The doors to the outside trash shed were open and the trash can knocked over. "Could it have been raccoons?" she asked.

"Possibly, but it's hard to imagine a raccoon could open those heavy doors. It sounds more like a bear," Joe said. "This is the time of year they're looking for dens. Bears aren't very common, but
they've been on the increase recently. I don't want to alarm you, but this could be serious." As he talked, his eyes darted back and forth. "Keep your voice low. Do you hear anything?"

"No," she said as she listened. "What should we do, oh wise woodsman? I'm a city girl. In Baltimore, we don't have bears roaming around overturning trash cans."

Joe was surprisingly earnest. "The bear may have gotten inside the cabin and then left, but we need to make sure. Stay close to me. Try to be as quiet as possible."

"My protector," Noelle whispered, half-nervous but feeling far too content to let a curious bear interfere with her perfect day.

They crept up to the front door where they saw a print on the door jamb. It was a partial print but the size of the pad made it obvious even to Noelle that a bear had made it. She pointed out a second print on the floor to Joe. This was more serious than she'd first thought.

Joe peered inside the cabin, listening intently. All was quiet. "It sounds safe, but you should stay outside while I check."

"I'm not leaving you to check on a bear by yourself. I'm staying right here with you." Joe looked like he wanted to argue but she put a hand to his mouth to forestall any rebuttal.

Nodding at her, he went inside. The kitchen was to the right, and clearly the bear was looking for food. Cabinet doors were open and a few cans were scattered on the floor. A paw print was on the refrigerator door. "Must have gotten into the jam," Joe whispered, pointing out an open jar on the counter.

Just then they heard scuffling sounds upstairs. "Okay, I'm convinced. Let's leave," she urged. "Call the police."

"I'm not letting any bear spoil our weekend," said Joe determinedly. "He'll have to find another den. This one's taken." He strode over to the storage closet under the stairs and poked around inside, coming out with a baseball bat. "You go back outside. I'll go upstairs and get the key to the truck. I may be able to spook the bear and make it seek greener pastures elsewhere. If not, we'll take the truck and call the police."

"No, I'm coming with you. We'll face this together, the two of us," she said, grabbing a broom.

"I can see, I'm not going to have any luck ordering you around," Joe said, shaking his head. "At least stay behind me. Once we find it, run downstairs, bang a pan against the sink, then escape outside. The sound should distract it long enough for me to make my getaway."

They crept up the stairs. The scrabbling noise was growing louder.

Upstairs there were three bedrooms: two small ones and the master bedroom at the end of the hallway. The sounds appeared to be coming from the master bedroom. Signaling Noelle to stay back, Joe cautiously walked into the bedroom, gripping the bat in front of him.

They could hear growls coming from the bathroom. But something about the growls didn't seem right. Noelle was no expert on bear growls, but these sounded suspiciously like choked back laughter.

"Boo!" and an old teddy bear waved a greeting from behind the door.

Noelle collapsed in laughter as Joe roared, "C'mon out of there this minute!"
Three heads poked out. "Trick or Treat!"

"This is revenge, isn't it, Peter?" Joe asked.

They were sitting in the living room. Peter had returned from bringing the car around. El had put away the cans while Neal cleaned off the jam paw prints.

"You got it," said Peter contentedly. "It's taken a few years, but it was worth it."

"You know your brother never gives up," rasped Neal, taking a drink of water.

"Do you have a sore throat?" Noelle asked. "You sound very croaky. At first I thought you were simply imitating a bear." Neal's turtleneck slipped down enough to reveal some of the bruising. "What happened to your neck?" she exclaimed.

Neal dismissed the injury with a wave of his hand. "Looks worse than it is. Nothing to be concerned about. Run in with a squid."

Noelle narrowed her eyes and looked over at Peter. "Anything to add? Is that squid in lockdown?"

"Not yet," Peter admitted, shaking his head, "but he will be."

"On the most wanted list, I hope?"

"Better believe it. Halloween came a little early for Neal and me this year," he added. "We came up to the cabin for some R&R since we have Monday off. You know, it really wasn't our intent to crash your weekend. Joe, why didn't you let the family know?"

"Noelle, it wouldn't have anything to do with that ring you're wearing, would it?" El asked.

Noelle sat down on the sofa next to Joe and put an arm around him. "Joe, do you want to take that or shall I?"

"Actually, since there's a male Caffrey present now, I should make up for my earlier omission," Joe said. "Neal, I would like your aunt to make me the happiest man on earth by marrying me. Do I have your blessing?"

Neal turned to Noelle, his face suddenly grave, "Noelle, do you find Mr. Burke perfectly amiable and to have no improper pride?"

Noelle didn't seem surprised but answered in kind, "My affections and wishes are such that I find myself believing we will be the happiest couple in the world."

"In that case," Neal said with a wide smile. "I find that you are indeed most worthy and deserving of my blessing—"

Before Peter could give Neal grief for being a smart aleck, an ecstatic El was clapping her hands in delight. "A Pride and Prejudice blessing. Can anything be more fitting?"

Breaking through the hugs and congratulations, Peter asked Joe, "Was that what you were doing this afternoon?"

"Yes, I took Noelle for a walk to the lake and proposed by the boat ramp," he replied.
"I had no idea that was what he was planning," Noelle said. "I thought we were just going to have a romantic weekend."

"Neal spotted the champagne in the fridge," Peter said. "Glad to see you came prepared. Guess you weren't worried about being turned down."

"Miles from civilization, I figured I'd be able to wear her down eventually," Joe replied. "But unexpectedly, she accepted me the first time."

El took Noelle's hand. "We shouldn't have pulled our trick on you. I hope we didn't spoil it for you."

"Are you kidding?" Noelle said. "That was the perfect ending to the best afternoon of my life. The chance to see Joe, my hero and champion, protecting me from menacing bears was a memory I'll treasure forever."

"There's lovely inn in town," El said. "We should leave and let you have the cabin."

"Oh no, you don't," Joe spoke up. "If anyone's leaving, it should be us."

"There's plenty of room for all of us," Peter said, cutting short any debate. "You two keep the master bedroom, and we'll take the guest rooms."

"I still feel badly about intruding," Elizabeth added, "but we won't get in your way. I brought a DVD to watch and Peter and Neal will be stargazing tonight. There's a TV in the guest room upstairs so I can watch it in bed. That's an indulgence I've been looking forward to. You can have the downstairs."

Dinner was a festive occasion with much toasting of the happy couple. El had made a generous amount of stew, and supplemented with the supplies Joe and Noelle had brought, there was ample for everyone.

**Stargazing in the Catskills. October 30, 2004. Saturday evening.**

After dinner Peter retrieved his telescope from the storage closet. "This isn't at all what I expected," Neal said as he knelt down to study it. "I thought it would be a long narrow tube. This is much shorter and wider."

"The first telescope I made was like what you described. This is called a Dobsonian. Some call them 'sidewalk telescopes' because they can be easily set up, even on street corners. Mine's a 10-inch model."

"And you ground the mirror yourself—Peter, I'm impressed." Neal couldn't resist a small smile as he watched Peter demonstrating its features with all the pride of a father showing off photos of his child.

"Time for us big sky hunters to take off," Peter announced.

"I have your thermoses packed," said El. "Hot chocolate, coffee, and a container of Halloween cookies."

"And I have my flask of brandy to add the right kick," added Peter. "I'll carry the telescope. You take the lantern and food."

"Why does the lantern have a red filter?" Neal asked.
"That's so we can read the sky charts without wrecking our night vision."

It took a few trips to assemble all the supplies: folding chairs, table, lap rugs, food, star charts. By eight o'clock they were in position and ready to look for witches.

Peter showed Neal how to orient the telescope. "You see Polaris in the Little Dipper? Point the telescope to Polaris, center it in the eyepiece and then use these setting circles to figure out where to find an object. Do the circles look familiar?"

"They're Apian wheels!" Neal said with a laugh. "All I need do is paint them in bright colors and add a dragon or two. No wonder you were so adept with those devices. All right, we've set up the telescope. Where are the witches?"

"Coming up." Peter chuckled at Neal's startled look. "If I'd only had a telescope, I could have seen witches right away that first evening," he added. "Watch and learn. I point it to Cygnus, the Swan and then pull up NGC 6960. You see the coordinates there on the star chart? Move the circles to the correct coordinates and see for yourself."

Neal peered through the eyepiece. At first he didn't see anything, and then slowly wispy filaments came into focus. "What is that? It looks like a ghostly apparition."

"A witch's broom, of course. It's what's called a diffuse nebula. There are some spectacular long-exposure photographs of it. The bright star you see in the middle is the witch riding the broom."

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Sprawled in a chair, holding a steaming mug of coffee, gazing up at the dark night sky with the stars twinkling bright, Neal sighed in contentment. He could get used to this stargazing business. Better than sitting in the van by a long shot. He looked over at Peter who was studying his star chart and aligning the telescope to pull up another deep sky object. The red filter on the lantern cast interesting shadows on his face.

Neal knew a few of the constellations, but not many. He let his eyes roam over the sky, picking out his own patterns. "Hey, Peter, what's that constellation straight up and to the right? It looks like an upside-down fleur-de-lis to me."

Peter looked up where he was pointing. "That's Perseus. Maybe we should rename it the Neal constellation."

"Why's that?"

"You see the cluster of stars on the right? That's the head of Medusa he's carrying. Perseus is even carrying a sword. We'll make that your sabre."

"My own constellation—I like that. Neal the Medusa slayer." Neal poured a little brandy from Peter's flask into his coffee. "But if I have a constellation, you need to have one too."

"Already have mine picked out: Bootes. Looks like a huge baseball bat."

"Perfect. Where is it?"

"Hiding below the horizon right now. If we stay up late enough you'll see him emerge in the east."

"What's his story?"
"Bootes means 'Bear-Watcher' or 'Herdsman.' According to the legends he's a protector, even has a couple of hunting dogs with him, which we could turn into Satchmo."

"We can't leave El out. Which one is hers?"

"That's an easy one. Ursa Major, the Big Dipper, or Mama Bear. Bootes circles her and protects her. In Roman mythology she was a beautiful young woman named Callisto. Jupiter transformed her into a bear to protect her. So there we all are, circling in the heavens. Actually, we should make you Ursa Minor rather than Perseus."

"Hold on a minute." Neal sat up and gave Peter a warning glare. "You're not making me into a baby bear. I'm sticking with Perseus, ace swordsman and Medusa-slayer. But you can still hang around with your baseball bat."

"Count on it, slick."

An elusive will-o'-the-wisp of a painting idea danced in the back of his mind. Neal didn't want to scare her off by staring directly at her. He knew she'd come back when he was alone with his paints. In the meantime, he could afford to relax. Peter dialed up night sky objects to look at as the evening progressed. The silence and serenity were otherworldly. All the traffic and other night noises of the city which he normally took for granted were absent. Neal felt more at peace than he had in a long time.

"More coffee?" asked Peter.

"Sure, and pass over that flask too." Neal sipped his coffee and stared up at the stars.

"What 'ya thinking?"

"Azathoth. He's out there. We didn't learn much about him."

"He let us take the Galileo manuscript. In his own cruel, distorted way he played fair. He let us escape. We know he's immensely wealthy. Anyone who could afford to stage that experience must have extremely deep pockets. The Lovecraft connection gives us a lead. The ownership of the house and bait shack will be researched. And the ruins may be productive."

"I bet that wasn't his real voice."

"You're probably right. It was Oz behind the curtain. We'll have to drag him out from behind the curtain."

"You sound confident of that."

"I am. Azathoth is a sadistic megalomaniac. We just need to be patient. He'll make more mistakes. But, as we're learning about him"—Peter paused and glanced over at Neal—"he's learning about us. That presents new challenges. Neal, what happened at the house when you froze? I'd climbed down, but you seemed trapped in a different reality. And don't tell me it was rats or a hawk."

Neal's eyes darted over to Peter. He had that cut-the-crap expression on his face he knew so well. But it was for the best. He'd been realizing for a while he should tell Peter, but it never seemed to be the right moment. There couldn't be a better occasion than this. "I've been having flashbacks. Of Klaus, that night at the museum when he was climbing down the museum wall, the shots, him falling. I don't have them very often, and they're not like before. I remember the flashbacks. They only occur when I'm looking down from a height."
Peter nodded as if it weren't a surprise. "I knew it was something like that. The tenement in Queens. That climb in the arena. Why didn't you tell me?"

It was a relief Peter was taking it so calmly. Neal tried to adopt the same detachment. "After everything that happened last spring—regaining my memory of the abuse, the therapy—I thought I was done. I'd closed that chapter of my life. But just like Klaus, it happened again. He's the chapter that refuses to close. When the flashbacks started, I couldn't believe history could repeat itself. I didn't want to believe it. I knew if I told you, you'd have to inform the FBI and it'd be put on my record. I'd be considered too unstable and be given a Section 8. Forced out." Peter wasn't questioning him. Probably too disappointed. But it was such a relief to finally be able to talk about it, that at least for now the damage it would do to his career didn't seem important.

Attempting not to sound too defensive, Neal added, "I've done a lot of reading on stress disorders—self-help, you know—and have been working through it on my own. It's getting better. I've developed techniques to fight it and they're working. The books say most cases are over within six weeks. It's been a month since the night at the museum when Klaus was killed. But last Thursday, probably because of the drugs in my system, I saw Klaus in front of me when I was about to climb down."

Peter still wasn't saying anything. Neal took another sip of coffee. They were both looking up at the stars. It was easier to talk about this at night in the dim light of the lantern. The warmth of the brandy, the lap rugs all helped to calm his nerves. "It's not like before. There's part of me that realizes what's going on but another part that's frozen, paralyzed."

"What are you doing to work through it?"

"I've been climbing down a lot of walls. Don't use June's stairs much. When I'm in a situation that triggers it—looking down from a height—I focus on breathing, thinking about something else. It's helping."

"And once you're in it, what pulls you out?"

"You," he admitted quietly.

Peter looked startled. "What do you mean?"

"I haven't had them all that often. You're usually there. Your voice snaps me out of it . . . or thinking about you. You're my life rope." Neal glanced over at Peter to see his reaction, surprised that he admitted what he felt.

"I'd probably be a better life rope, if I knew that's what I was, don't ya think?" he asked wryly. "Do you trust me, Neal?"

"Of course I do. You know that."

"Well then, trust me when I tell you that if you tell me you're suffering from flashbacks, I won't fly off and report you. I won't 'Section 8' you. We'll work through it together, deal?"

"Yeah, okay, deal."

"Pinky swear?"

"Pinky swear," Neal said with a low chuckle. "I haven't done many of those. Merit badge, pinky swear, all in one day. Life-changing events."
"Good," Peter answered. "Because I'm in this for the distance. I won't sprint out of your life after a couple of laps. I've done my share of training in stress disorder. Despite your misconceptions, it's a frequent problem for FBI agents, and no, they don't get tossed out with the trash when it happens. Did these books you've been reading mention the need to talk to someone?"

"I believe that was discussed," Neal admitted.

"Noelle's inside. They're staying the weekend. You could arrange something?" Peter suggested.

"No," he answered shortly. "What happened in my childhood was different. There was also the need to keep my time in WITSEC private. But now I don't want her involved with what I do at the FBI. It's too hard on her and too difficult to maintain objectivity. I don't want her worrying about the undercover ops I'm on and fretting about the dangers. I saw how tough it was on her with Henry last summer. She shouldn't have to go through that with me."

"You need to talk to someone."

"Can I talk to you?"

"Okay, but no holding back, all right?"

Neal nodded. "I know. Believe it or not, I've been wanting to. It's just . . . hard to get started."

"No time like now," Peter said, as he pulled his chair around to face Neal. "Why do you think you're having the flashbacks?"

"That's an easy one—guilt. Stopping the flashbacks is the hard part. But I'm beginning to accept his death."

"That's good. Mansfeld was a killer. And you did what was right. I'm not saying he didn't have any admirable qualities. There was much about him that was very attractive. I can understand why it's so tough on you. But along with everything else, he was a cold-blooded killer. Part of you knew that from the beginning. That's why you offered to take him down. But there's another part of you—the soft, squishy side—that hates to admit it. That will come."

"Soft, squishy side? I don't remember reading about that when I was helping Henry study for his master's in psychology."

"Hey, you want technical terms? Noelle's right inside."

"No, you're doing fine." Hearing Peter put into words what he was feeling, he knew Peter was right. Eventually he'd come to terms with it.

Peter continued, "If you stay with the FBI you'll face many similar situations. Not all the same. Some may be worse. You weren't guilty of anything this time, but you may be the next time. Or the time after. And you have to learn how to deal with it or let others help you. Undercover ops are one of the most stressful jobs an agent can perform. The FBI recognizes this and offers a range of assistance programs. You shouldn't hesitate to use them. I know how guilt can rip a person apart."

Peter sounded as if he were talking from personal experience. "Have you had to deal with it?" Neal asked.

"Sure. Everyone does who stays long enough. Take what happened to Jimmy Burger, for instance. Good kid. Bright, talented. We brought him in as a criminal informant, and he did good work for us . . . till he went off on his own. Had a bright idea, didn't let others know about it and tried to run it
on his own."

"I'm guessing you're telling me this because it didn't end well."

"That's right. Got himself killed. Single bullet to the forehead. I blamed myself for not having supervised him better. Took me a long time to get over it. Maybe that's why I'm so strict with you. Remember what I told you right after Mansfeld died. You don't just snap back after something like that happens. It's normal and it'll go a hell of a lot faster if you ask for help. That's what I did."

"Words to live by?"

"You got that right. So we'll talk some more tonight, tomorrow, Monday. Work through some of these issues, okay?"

"Yeah, it's more than okay."

They sat together a while in companionable silence, watching the stars. Peter pulled up a few more objects in his telescope to observe. The cookies had vanished, but there was still plenty of hot chocolate.

"You know, the gun business . . ." Neal casually tossed out this potential grenade and braced for impact.

"Yeah, you decide what to do?"

"I'm really not a gun guy. And after Thursday night, I think I'll keep it that way. I'll maintain my skill, pass the certification exams, but not carry one. Is that a problem?"

"Not at all. We didn't hire you to be a gunslinger, after all." Peter paused and rubbed the back of his head, his face growing more somber. "Neal, you know if for nothing else, we'll make Azathoth pay for what he did on Thursday. I wish I'd gone over the barricade first and been the one to confront tentacle-face."

"I was thinking about that. His face—that elaborate prosthesis—it reminded me of a monster you might see in a sci-fi movie. I wonder if Azathoth has a connection to the film industry, perhaps to special effects?"

"Worth investigating. When you were unconscious, he must have switched tentacle-face with somebody dressed up like me and wearing a face mask."

"He had time after drugging us in the bait shack to acquire duplicates of our clothes."

"After you turned over the body that looked like me, what happened?"

"Dunno. I vaguely remember footsteps behind me, but nothing else. The next thing I knew, I was lying in a corner and you—the body—had disappeared." Neal switched positions in his chair. He hated how uneasy thinking about that night made him feel.

Peter seemed to understand. "We'll talk more about Azathoth later. Broad daylight. You mentioned you had a plan for dealing with the heights thing?"

"Yep, I move into stage two next week."

"What's that?"

"There's a new rock wall at Chelsea Piers. Just opened. It's has a forty-six high wall. Figure if I can
do that, I should be good."

"Here's how we'll handle it. Your books said to allow up to six weeks to get over flashbacks. In two weeks I come and watch you climb down that wall. You do well, which I know you will, I'll drop it, but after that, if you have a recurrence, you're meeting with the FBI shrink. Okay, partner?"

"Partner? You never called me that," Neal said, feeling a sudden warmth which wasn't caused by the brandy.

"Well, yeah, that's what you and I are, and partners don't shut each other out. Got it?"

"Got it."

"Of course, you're the junior partner." Peter started ticking off his advantages with relish. "I have full veto rights. Any tie goes to me—"

"Hold on a minute. You do understand the meaning of the word partner, right? We could flip a coin—"

"Oh sure, junior," Peter interrupted. "Like I'm going to fall for you and your coin tricks. Well, look at that," and Peter pointed to the sky.

"What?"

"There's my baseball bat coming out from under the horizon, and see that bright star-looking object straight to the east? Any guesses as to what it is?"

"Don't tell me. It's Azathoth, the Demon Star."

"Nope, it's Jupiter. Like to see it in the telescope?"

"I feel like Galileo. How many moons will we find?"

"Let's find out."

Interrupting their search was the sound of approaching footsteps. "I thought you might be getting low on supplies," El said. "I brought more coffee and cookies."

"Our angel of mercy bearing gifts." Peter said, giving her a kiss. "How are our two lovebirds?"

"They've gone upstairs. I finished the first part of Pride and Prejudice and am saving the rest for tomorrow. Are you enjoying stargazing, Neal? Has Peter pointed out his constellation yet?"

"It's just coming up. He showed me yours, too. I even have mine now."

"Are you . . .?"

"Put that thought out of your mind," Neal said hastily. "I'm nobody's baby bear." He smacked his chest. "Perseus, the Medusa-slayer, that's me."

"Just remember, I'm up there on constant patrol watching after my pack," Peter said. "Have Noelle and Joe set a date yet?"

"They'd like to get married over the Christmas holiday. They said they'd like the wedding somewhere they'd never been. It will be symbolic of a fresh start for both of them."
"Someplace exotic I hope, and warm," Neal said. "Tahiti, the Riviera, Hawaii, Fiji. I'll make them a list."

"The aurora borealis is spectacular around then," Peter commented, stroking his chin. "I can picture it now. A wedding under the northern lights—now that would be a Kodak moment. Besides, I've always wanted to go to Sweden, or maybe Iceland . . ."

"They're not going to have a Viking wedding!" El said firmly. "Erase that thought."

"We should at least suggest it. Viking mating rituals can be quite entertaining."

Notes: The curtain falls as Neal, Peter, and El prepare to spend the next couple of days relaxing in the Catskills. But they won't have very long to rest, as I'll be back next Thursday with my next story in the series, The Queen's Jewels. That tale concerns the theft of earrings once owned by Marie Antoinette. The appearance of Garrett Fowler at White Collar will spell bad news for Neal and his friends. I've gone ahead posted some pins for The Queen's Jewels on our Caffrey Conversation Pinterest site at www.pinterest.com/caffreycon. There are also several pins for this last chapter of The Woman in Blue.

Thanks very much for joining me in this adventure! Reading your feedback has made this experience such a pleasure and you've given me many great ideas for future tales.

You may have noticed that Neal is sensitive to the term "baby bear." Readers of Caffrey Disclosure by Penna Nomen know why. When he was a baby, his grandmother called him "Baby Bear" because of the growls he made when he was unhappy. She even went so far as to dress him in fuzzy bear outfits. Neal was unaware of his ursine resemblance till he watched a DVD over Father's Day at the Burkes' that his aunt Noelle had supplied. Peter and El were being kind here not to tease him too much about it. Spinning stories around baby bears has been just one example of the countless ways Penna makes writing such a delight. Characterizing Peter as a long-distance runner was her inspired suggestion.

You'll be happy to know that Joe and Noelle's engagement was not derailed by the reverse Goldilocks maneuver. Once she finishes Caffrey Disclosure, Penna plans to write a story about a jewel heist that will also include the nuptials. As for Azathoth, it's a safe bet that Neal and Peter haven't heard the last of him.

As we take leave of Neal, Peter, and El gazing up at the stars, Penna and I would like to pause to mourn the passing of Leonard Nimoy. His embodiment of Spock inspired many of us to dream of the stars and space aliens, of a world which celebrates the infinite diversity of life. Spock will live on in our hearts.

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