Return and Rebuild the Desolate Places
by elrhiarhodan

Summary

Six months after Neal disappears at the end of Season Five, Peter still has no answers and his decision not to go to Washington has had significant repercussions for both his career and his marriage.

Notes

Title from Alan Hovhaness’ wind concerto, which takes it from the Old Testament.

Artwork by Kanarek13
Sometime in Late January – Tuesday Evening

Olivia scrubbed at her eyes. It was ten minutes before the end of shift and it had been a fucking long
It was ten minutes before the end of shift and her desk phone rang. The caller ID said it was from Mount Sinai-Roosevelt Hospital over on the West Side. She could ignore it. She could just put on her jacket and head to the ladies room and then walk out the door. There was no one on any caseload there, so it was probably a new call out. If she didn’t answer, the call would go back to the desk and forwarded to the detective squad. Forget that she was in command of the SVU, she simply wasn’t a cop who shirked her duty and as long as she was on the clock, she had to answer.

She picked up the phone on the third ring. “Sergeant Olivia Benson, Manhattan Special Victims Unit.” She reached for a pad and pen.

“Hey, Olivia – it’s Donna over at the Roosevelt ER. I think I have something for you if the uniforms haven’t already called it in.”

“Haven’t heard anything from the front desk, it’s been quiet. What have you got?”

Donna, a veteran ER nurse, and someone she’d worked with for years, fed her the facts in short bursts, “White male, mid-thirties, was brought in about two hours ago. Stabbed, but also pretty badly beaten up, looks like there’s been a lot of long-term abuse. Witness said he saw him dumped from the back of an unmarked white van just off the West Side Highway. Guy had no ID. Would have called you sooner, but he needed emergency surgery.”

Olivia sighed. No matter how bright and shining New York’s crime statistics were these days, there were always going to be victims. “I’ll be right over.” She looked around the almost empty squad room. She’d already sent Amaro home, Fin and Rollins were out chasing a lead, and the next shift hadn’t arrived yet. She sighed again. There was no point in tagging anyone else. The vic was in surgery and it was doubtful he’d be in any condition to give a statement until tomorrow, if he survived surgery. But she’d check at the hospital and at least get the medical particulars and witness information.

Twenty minutes later, she was at the ER desk, talking with Donna.

“Guy looked like – shit – like well, shit. You know what I mean?”

“Can you be a little more specific?” Olivia grimaced at the nurse.

“It looks like the vic was either into a really bad scene or held as prisoner somewhere.”

“Prisoner?”

“Yeah, that’s why I called SVU – he’d been worked over but good. Bruises on top of bruises, chest, back and thighs beaten raw, looks like he’d been whipped repeatedly. Taser burns all over his torso and from the abrasions on his neck and ankles, I’d say he’d been chained up, too.”

Olivia had to ask, “Rape?”

“Hasn’t been confirmed. Whoever dumped him was trying to kill him. He was stabbed, but the knife missed his lung by millimeters. We didn’t have a chance to do a rape kit, but I wouldn’t be surprised. Guy was lucky, though. There was a limo parked on 12th and 52nd and the driver was about to take a nap. He saw the whole thing and called 911. The uniforms should have his name – the driver, not the vic.” Donna nodded at a pair of patrol officers hanging out by the vending machines.

Olivia thanked the ER nurse and went to check in with the two uniformed officers. They were
almost stupidly young. “You caught the call for the John Doe?”

The slightly older one snapped to attention. Pederson, according to his name tag, answered. “Yes, ma’am – sir – sergeant. Ma’am.”

She tried hard not to roll her eyes at the rookie’s stammer. She might have a fearsome reputation, but that was no excuse. “Report?”

“We – um, uh – um …”

The other rookie, Kline, who was apparently the brains of the operation, stepped in and answered. “We were on patrol on Eleventh when we answered the call. Limo driver saw a body dumped out of a white Ford van.” Checking her notebook, she rattled off the name and particulars of the witness. “The guy was bleeding and we called for a bus – that was at 3:21 PM. We would have called it into the One-Five as an assault and attempted murder, but the ER nurse said that this one should be reported to SVU, was that okay?”

Olivia assured the pair that they had done the right thing. “Any chance that the limo driver got a look at the plates?”

Kline shook her head. “No – just a Ford van. White, an Econoline – like a thousand others in the city. Those damn things don’t change from year to year, so it’s going to be hard to pin down. Traffic’s going to pull vid from the area, but that’ll take time.”

Olivia nodded. “Thanks, good work.” She dismissed the officers, sending them back out to patrol and tried to remember if she was ever that young, that raw and unsure of herself. She checked back with Donna, who sent her up to Surgery. The JD was still in the operating room and she probably wouldn’t be able to talk with him for another four or five hours at the earliest. She left instruction for a tag-up when the man was conscious and able to talk. Regardless, Olivia planned on coming back in the morning.

Sometime in Late January - Wednesday Afternoon

Peter rolled his shoulders, trying to ease some of the tension headache that had taken up permanent residence these past six months. It didn’t do any good. Nor did the ibuprofen he downed without much concern for the state of his internal organs. Nothing was going to fix this.

“You ready, boss?” Diana didn’t bother to knock; she just poked her head in his office.

“Yeah.” Peter opened his desk drawer, opened the small gun safe and took out his weapon. They were only heading over to the Treasury Department, but habits of a nearly twenty-year career were hard to break.

“Any idea why the Secret Service wants to talk with us?”

“I have no clue, and it’s not ‘us’, just me. You’re just coming along to intimidate some Treasury agents.”

“Sounds like fun.” Di gave him a bright grin, but her eyes were filled with understanding.

Things were difficult and weird for him these days, both professionally and personally. He’d told Bruce that he wasn’t taking the promotion and why. Three hours later, he got a call from the Marshals that Neal had cut his tracker.
There was no joy left in his life, not even the challenge of the job. When he decided to stay in New York as ASAC, Peter had figured he’d spend his days balancing his administrative responsibilities with more-than-occasional fieldwork. Neal, angry and reluctant for a while, would be at his side for another year. He’d do what he could to ease the restrictions, keeping him off-anklet as much as he could. He’d believed Neal when he said he was going straight, he’d believed him because he knew that there was one thing that mattered more to Neal than the next big score. That was staying out of prison.

But Neal had disappeared. He’d gone dark like he’d never before. There was no trace of the man he knew as Neal Caffrey – he was gone as if he’d never existed.

Bruce, whose partisanship for him had abruptly waned when Peter had changed his mind about going to D.C., counseled him to drop the Caffrey matter and let the Marshals deal with it. It was their job to recapture escaped felons. His support had dwindled to a trickle and then dried up completely when Peter ignored his advice and kept insisting that Neal hadn’t run, that something must have happened to him. His proof, though, was shaky. Neal had left everything behind. He’d never hinted – not even to his friends and associates – that he was running.

And according to the Marshals, that made perfect sense. Neal was on the run. Telling anyone would be counterproductive. And he’d certainly left everything behind before.

Peter couldn’t tell the Marshals that he was certain that Neal hadn’t run because he’d left Mozzie behind. They’d insist it was a fake out, a set up. Caffrey was a conman who plotted sophisticated crimes and knew the value of a red herring. Peter knew better. He might leave him without a word, but not Mozzie. Never Mozzie. If he had run, the little guy might have waited a few weeks to divert suspicion before slipping away to join him. But it had been six months and the man was still here, still insisting that Neal has fallen victim to foul play.

Peter could always tell when Moz was lying – it was his natural state. When he said that he’d talked to Neal not a half-hour before Neal’s tracker was cut, that they’d discussed their options (and Peter figured that by “options,” Moz meant fucking with the tracker’s signal), and Neal said nothing about running, he believed him.

And more to the point, Neal simply wouldn’t have run. He might have been furious that the FBI wasn’t going to release him from his work-release agreement a day before they had to, but he had known it was a long-shot when he’d approached Peter. He also knew that he could have made an appeal, made a stink, use whatever legal means he could to force the Bureau’s hand.

Peter argued until he was blue in the face that Neal was too smart to run with just a year left. The Marshals and the Justice Department insisted otherwise. They pointed to his original escape from Sing-Sing, when he only had three months left on a four year sentence. They brought up his flight to Cape Verde hours before the Commutation Board was about to rule in his favor. The Marshals said that Neal Caffrey wasn’t smart. He was a creature ruled by his criminal impulses and a pathological need to flaunt authority. He ran and that was all there was to it.

Objectively, it was hard to disagree with that assessment. But Peter knew Neal, he knew that Neal wouldn’t run. He’d be angry, he’d be uncooperative, he’d play both ends against the middle, but he wouldn’t run.

They said he was too close to Neal Caffrey to be objective. They issued a fugitive arrest warrant and Peter tried to take some comfort in the fact that it wasn’t a shoot-on-sight order.

Peter did what he could – every spare minute (and there weren’t that many) was spent tracking down
leads, checking in with contacts in Europe, Asia, South America, even Africa. It broke him in too many ways, but he checked the morgues, too.

At least he had his team backing him. Clinton had been skeptical of Peter’s belief that Neal hadn’t run, but he helped when he could. Diana, on the other hand, was just as convinced as he was that Neal’s disappearance wasn’t voluntary, and for the same reason: he had left Mozzie behind.

She confided in him that Moz showed up at her door every morning, Monday through Friday, like clockwork, dedicated to taking care of Theo. He had lost his customary verbosity, his wit, even his quirky charm was diminished.

Unlike the last time Neal had disappeared, Peter wasn’t relegated to sweepstakes fraud and 419 scams. He was still ASAC, still responsible for a high-profile department with an excellent closure rate. But it wasn’t hard to tell that he was the Bureau's least favorite agent. One doesn’t turn down a promotion to Section Chief at the eleventh hour and fifty-ninth minute without repercussions.

He’d been warned about going after Neal, that it was a sure path to career suicide.

The call this morning from the Secret Service was something out of the blue. And troubling. They asked him to come down to the Treasury Department office. He wasn’t given a reason, just an abrupt command to be there at two o’clock sharp.

In the old days – the good old days – he’d have grabbed Neal and enjoyed watching Treasury agents get all hot and sweaty at the thought of one of the world’s greatest forgers within their sacred confines. But Neal was gone. He could have taken a probie with him, but he didn’t want to deal with some nervous and sweaty overachiever trying to make conversation with him.

So he tagged Diana, who should have turned him down in favor of her own massive caseload. He was grateful that she didn’t.

His head ached, his shoulders ached and no amount of neck-rolling was going to make the pain go away, but he couldn’t stop trying. At least the elevator was empty and made no stops as it descended to the lobby.

Diana didn’t say anything until they got to the street. “Elizabeth coming home this weekend?”

He didn’t answer right away.

If Neal’s disappearance was the open wound, bleeding for all of the world to see, El’s constant absence was the sore festering under his skin. This was the third weekend in a row that she’d had an excuse not to come back to New York. He’d offered to hop on a train and come down Friday night, but she said she’d be too busy to make it worth his while. And besides, who would take care of Satchmo while he was away?

“Peter?”

He hated the concern in Diana’s voice. “No, she’s got a meeting with the French cultural attaché Friday night about artwork on loan and then managing a dinner party for some high-powered fundraisers on Saturday. There’s no point to her coming back Sunday morning just to leave again Sunday night.”

“Oh.” There was a wealth of understanding in that single syllable.

They dodged a puddle of toxic-looking semi-frozen slush and navigated around the piles of dirt-encrusted snow that never seemed to get any smaller.
“How about coming over for dinner on Saturday? You, me, Theo, and the Heat-Knicks game. Some Thai food. I can actually have beer again.”

Peter smiled. “Sounds tempting. I’ll let you know.” But they both knew that he would decline the invitation and spend the night going through old case files, looking at new crimes, trying to find some clue to Neal’s disappearance and where he might be.

They stopped at the corner and Diana turned to him while they waited for the light to change. “Have you considered that you’ll never find him?”

Her question cut him. “No. That is not something I’ll ever accept.” But he could hear the lack of conviction in his voice. With every passing day, his hopes dimmed. He had scoured dozens of reports of Caffrey-esque crimes, looking for Neal’s signature – that tell-tale sign of brilliance, that little detail that shouted “Neal was here”, the flash of genius that was his way of thumbing his nose at law enforcement – but he’d never found it.

“Then you will.” At least Diana seemed confident in his abilities.

Peter wished he shared that confidence.
Chapter 2

Peter and Diana finished the walk to the Treasury Department in silence. Despite their badges, despite Peter’s rank in the FBI, they were asked to wait at the front desk until a Secret Service agent came to escort them to this mysterious meeting.

He was inevitably reminded of a comment Neal had once made about the ‘Men in Black bobsled team’ when not one, but two Secret Service agents, in nearly identical dark suits, white shirts and unadorned ties, came out of the elevator.

“Agent Burke?”

Peter nodded, and introduced Diana. The agents didn’t look happy that he hadn’t come alone, but they didn’t have the authority or perhaps the nerve – in the face of Diana’s stony glare – to insist that she remain behind.

They were escorted to a secure conference room equipped with state of the art video equipment and there were two senior agents already seated. Neither man stood or introduced himself.

“Tell us about Neal Caffrey.” The tone of the request was both snide and combative.

His heart skipped a beat at the unexpected mention of Neal’s name. In no mood to be dicked around, Peter snapped back, “I’d be more inclined to assist if you didn’t behave like assholes and at least told me your names.”

That earned him the stink eye from the agent who had asked about Neal and a more appraising glance from the other. “Rand Carlyle and Michael Snider, from Financial Crimes. We’re told you’re the expert on Neal Caffrey.”

Peter nodded slowly. “Why is the Secret Service interested in Neal?”

The agent who gave him the dirty look before – that would be Michael Snider – curled his lip before answering. “I’d think that was obvious. Caffrey’s a wanted fugitive and considered the one of the world’s greatest forgers.”

Peter didn’t respond or rise to Neal’s defense. “You didn’t just randomly select Neal out of a hat. There has to be a reason.”

Carlyle said, in a more conciliatory tone, “We have some suspect currency that may have been produced by Mr. Caffrey.”

“Suspect? You’re not sure it’s counterfeit?” Trust Diana to get to the heart of the matter.

Snider answered, “It’s counterfeit, that’s for certain.”

But Carlyle shook his head, ever so slightly. “Let’s just leave it at ‘suspect’, shall we?” He flipped a switch on the control console, the room darkened and highly magnified images of three U.S. hundred dollar bills, with the 1991 design, appeared on screen.

“You think these are Neal’s work?”

Snider muttered something, but Carlyle shushed him. “We’re not sure – and we’re hoping you can help.”
“Counterfeit currency is a little like being pregnant or dead. Either it is or it isn’t. You’re saying that you don’t know if these bills are real or fake?” Peter didn’t bother to keep the derision out of his voice.

Carlyle scrubbed at his face. “The countermeasures are there, the paper is correct, but there are inconsistencies in the printing.”

“What are you looking at?”

Snider picked up a laser pointer and directed it to the bank seal. “The bleed is off and there seems to be something underneath the seal. Didn’t Caffrey sign his work – those bonds – under the bank seal?”

“That’s not common knowledge.” Peter bristled. The information had not been part of Neal’s trial, but something Neal had told him when they’d first gone after the Dutchman. Fowler had used it to implicate Neal in a diamond theft, but it should have been expunged from the record after Neal was cleared.

“We have our sources.” Snider was way too smug. Peter wanted to punch him.

“Agent Burke, we’d like you to give us your opinion.” Carlyle was trying to smooth things over. “Can you help us?”

Peter got up and took a closer look at the images on the screen. Something told him that he was being snowed. This had nothing to do with signatures under bank seals, but if that was the way they wanted to play it. “I’m really not an expert in counterfeit currency. That’s your area.”

“But you are the expert in Neal Caffrey.”

Peter didn’t answer. He looked closely at the Treasury seals on each bill. “You’ve examined these under polarized light?” Neal had admitted to him that his signature on the bonds was only visible that way.

“Yes.”

“And you found an ‘NC’?”

Snider grumbled, but Carlyle said, “No.”

“Then why do you think that these are Neal’s work?”

Snider answered, “Caffrey was involved in an undercover operation with an authentic 1991 flexographic plate. A plate which we never recovered, I have to remind you.”

Peter nodded, having to concede the point. “Have you compared these to the bills that were recovered when we busted that operation?”

Snider grimaced and Carlyle tapped a few keys on the control console. Three more bills – these stamped with the damning word “COUNTERFEIT” in bright red – appeared on the screen.

How the hell was he going to be able to compare the bills?

A few more key tapes, the video flickered and the legend disappeared.

That impressed Peter. “Nice trick.”
“The ink color on the stamp is specially formulated so it can be filtered out on video displays. We’re not stupid, you know.”

Peter wanted to say that the jury was still out, but he kept that to himself. Diana joined him in front of the monitor and they examined the images of the six bills. “What do you think?”

Diana’s gaze flickered back and forth between the bills. “I don’t think these were printed from the same plate.” She pointed to the edges of the frame around Franklin’s head on the bills the Treasury was trying to attribute to Neal. “These are a little crisper – like the printing plate was newer.”

Snider was aggressive as he noted, “The variances are minute, but could be accounted for with the differences in ink and paper.”

Peter asked, “Have you run these through a computer analysis?”

“Of course.”

“And it wasn’t a favorable result, I’m guessing.”

“Why do you say that?”

“If it was, you’d have told me as soon as I walked in.”

“Computers aren’t foolproof.”

“They’re less foolproof than the human eye. You’re not even certain that these bills – ” Peter pointed to the three original images, “are actually counterfeits.”

“Look, can you help us or not?” Carlyle was still playing the peacemaker.

Snider, though, wasn’t inclined to be peaceful. “More to the point, will you help us? We’ve heard all about your ‘relationship’ with Caffrey, how you turned down a huge promotion because the Justice Department wouldn’t cut him loose. I can’t help but wonder if you’re shielding him, if you know where he is and are helping him out. Wouldn’t be the first time an FBI agent crossed the line for his CI.”

Peter knew that punching the man would spell the end of his career and he almost didn’t care. Almost. He got his temper under control and deliberately ignoring Snider and his baiting, Peter turned to Carlyle, “I can help, but I’ll need copies of these images. I want to compare them with other examples of known Caffrey work.”

Snider wasn’t going to be ignored. “How about you send those to us and let us make the determination?”

Peter took a deep breath and gritted his teeth. “No. This is my offer, take it or leave it.”

Carlyle nodded. “I can’t give you the actual bills, but I can send you the high-res scans.”

Peter nodded. “That will work. You have my email address, do you need anything else?”

Snider looked like he was about to say something, but Carlyle shook his head, smiled and thanked him for his assistance.

Peter refused to be mollified. “Then we’re done here.”
It was nice to have a purpose in life, even one as legitimate as caring for his namesake. Not that the She-Eagle actually paid him for his services. The one time he raised the question, she suggested that he never bring it up again, if he wanted to stay out of prison and spend *any* time with her son again.

Truthfully, Mozzie didn’t mind being an unpaid servant to the tiny one, especially since he had strong feelings against the concept of “work”. Besides, there were worse things in life than changing diapers and cleaning up spit-up.

Like not knowing what happened to your best friend.

He couldn’t accept that Neal would leave him without a word. Not after everything. At first, he figured that Neal saw an opportunity and just took it. So he waited for a word, a sign, a coded instruction on where to find him. A week passed and Moz didn’t panic.

The Suit came and asked him where Neal had gone and Moz had no answer. He didn’t know. The Suit believed him. Maybe because he’d forgotten to accompany that statement with his usual snark about not telling him if he did.

Another week and still nothing from Neal. He checked all the usual places, and then all the unusual places. He went from safe house to safe house, even the ones he’d abandoned when “Teddy Winters” was compromised, but there was no sign of Neal. He checked his cellphones constantly, the dozens of anonymous email accounts he’d created over the years, the lock boxes and mail boxes and drop boxes, but there was nothing from his friend.

Moz finally started to worry. No matter what Neal had decided, he wouldn’t have left him in the dark this long. He would have sent him some kind of message.

Unless he couldn’t.

The weeks turned into a month and the logic was inescapable. He rang the Suit’s doorbell and forced himself not to run before the man answered it. It was one thing to invite himself into the Suits’ lair when he was sure of his welcome by Mrs. Suit; it was another to go there when she was not in residence.

The Suit – Peter – looking sad and tired, welcomed him in with a wave. “No word?”

Moz just shook his head.

Peter said without any preamble, “Neal didn’t run.” He’d sounded as sure of that as the rising sun.

“I am beginning to agree with you.”

Peter gave him a sharp look. “Beginning?”

He’d shrugged. “Okay – I might have agreed before, but now I *really* agree with you. And what are you doing about it?”

The Suit sighed. “Whatever I can, but it isn’t much. I’m not permitted to officially look for him. I’ve been told, in no uncertain terms, that if I open any investigation into Neal’s whereabouts, I will lose my job. And this time, it will be permanent. Neal’s been classified as an escaped felon and the Marshals have jurisdiction. I’m not allowed to interfere.”

Moz didn’t say that that hadn’t stopped the Suit before, but he knew when not to rub salt into a wound. “I have feelers out.”
Peter had nodded, and Moz’s heart wrenched at the grief in the other man’s eyes.

“I’ll keep in touch.” Moz got up, intending to keep this visit brief.

Peter reached out and grabbed his arm. “If you do hear anything – if Neal contacts you and says he’s never coming back – just, just let me know? Please? I won’t try to stop him or drag him back, but I have to know that he’s all right.”

Moz couldn’t, wouldn’t deny anyone that comfort. “I will.”

Peter let him go and Moz made it to the street before giving in to tears.

They made it a point not to see each other. There was no point, not until he had something to share. Moz trusted that if the Suit learned anything, he’d pass it on through the She-Eagle. She was the one he saw every day.

Theo was sleeping. At nine months or so, he’d become a real little person and intently interested in the world around him, but he still needed regular naps. Moz made himself a cup of tea and took a cellphone out of his bag and used it to check all of the email accounts he’d set up. He was too paranoid to link them to a master service, and it was tedious going through the log-in process over thirty times, but if there was just one message from Neal, it would be worth it.

Except that there wasn’t. The mailboxes were filled with spam of all sorts: offers for cheap Rolex watches and ways to “enhance” his manhood. Angelina Jolie wanted to date him and a Nigerian prince needed his help getting a few hundred million out of the country, if he’d just give him his bank account information.

Moz didn’t bother to delete the spam, these accounts were unimportant except that Neal had the addresses.

He saved the best one for last, the Dante Havesham address that Neal had sent an SOS to all those years ago. The one that Neal used because he knew that he’d reach out to the Suit.

But there was nothing there.

Moz sighed and pocketed the phone. He glanced over at Theo, who was still sleeping so peacefully. Just as he was about to reach for the latest A.B. Tattersall thriller, a different cellphone buzzed. He checked the readout – it was Clive, the guy who’d bought about half of the marked bills that Neal had given him after dosing the evil psychiatrist with his variation of “Goodnight Cinderella”. Clive was a decent sort – he paid well and played fair and was never shy about returning a favor. While his finances had not quite recovered to their pre-Teddy Winters status, he was flush again and interested in expanding his holdings.

Moz stepped out of the nursery and answered the phone. “Have anything for me?” He got right to the point.

“Know anyone in the market for Franklins? Would you be in the market for Franklins?”

“Clean or dirty?”

“That’s up for debate.”

Huh? “That’s a new one on me.”

“Seriously. These are good. If they’re dirty, it’s the cleanest dirty around.”
“‘91 series?”

“Yeah.”

“What’s the going rate?”

“My guy wants about forty percent of face. When was the last time you got such a sweet deal on C-notes?”

Moz blinked. If Clive was asking for forty on the dollar, he was buying at thirty, at most.

“Quantity?”

“Large. About five million with the discount.”

He did the math and that was almost twelve million face. He could put the cash together, but it would mean a substantial liquidation. And moving that much suspect currency meant reaching out to contacts overseas. Twelve million wasn’t enough to destabilize the U.S. economy, but it was serious quantity and had to be moved with care. “Let me think on it.”

“Well, don’t think too long. My guy is eager to move on and if you don’t take the deal, someone else will.”

“And you know I don’t like hard sell tactics. Maybe you need to find another buyer.”

Clive chuckled. “Okay – I’ll call you back tomorrow. No, wait – make that the day after tomorrow. I have to take my kid to the dentist. Same time, same number. If you want it, be ready to execute and take delivery.”

“Understood.” Moz disconnected and went back into the nursery. Something didn’t feel right about this. He needed to go see June and check out Byron’s library. He wondered if a certain flexographic plate had gone missing again.
Sometime in Late January – Wednesday Afternoon

They made it down to the street before Diana asked. “You saw something, boss?”

“Don’t know. I don’t want to say, not just yet.” There was something there, something he couldn’t put his finger on. It could be his gut or simply wishful thinking.

Di was persistent, though. “You think those are Neal’s work?”

“Damn it, Diana – didn’t I just say that I didn’t want to say?” But there was no real anger in his voice.

“Yeah, sorry about that, boss.”

“No you’re not, but that’s okay.” Peter smiled, taking a small bit of pleasure in the comfortable repartee between them. He wasn’t sure what he’d do if Diana ever left White Collar. She was his rock and sometimes he couldn’t help but feel guilty for leaning on her so much. Not that she minded, but still…

It was close to four when they made it back to the office. He left Diana at her desk. She had her phone out and was talking with Moz, undoubtedly checking up on Theo. Peter couldn’t help but be a little jealous – there was a time, not so long ago, when he’d be making his own four o’clock check-in with Elizabeth. But her busy schedule at the National Gallery didn’t allow too much time for a needy husband.

They’d talk late tonight, sharing the mundane events of the day before going to sleep. It wasn’t like they hadn’t dealt with long separations before. The early years of their marriage had been punctuated by his own travel and as El’s business expanded, she added clients on the west coast that needed her time and personal attention. But this separation felt different, it felt like a portent of things to come. A lifetime of loneliness.

Peter deliberately changed his train of thought. This had been his decision, and he’d have to live with it.

He logged into his email and was pleased that Carlyle had done as promised and forwarded the hi-resolution images. He had seen something, but he couldn’t quite put his finger on what it was. His computer monitor was decent, but it didn’t have the resolution of the one in the conference room at the Treasury Department and he couldn’t find what he was looking for. He wondered …

“Andrea?” Peter called in his administrative assistant.

“Andrea?” The woman, who’d worked for Hughes back when Peter had just come into White Collar, still refused to use his first name, no matter how many times he insisted. “What can I help you with?”

“I need something printed in very high resolution on transparencies. Do you know if we have equipment that can handle that?”

She thought for a moment. Peter could almost hear a Rolodex flipping through her head. “I think so. I’ll check with IT. I’m pretty sure that they’ve got a photo-quality printer, but I’m not sure if it prints on transparencies. Give me a few minutes and I’ll get back to you.”
Andrea called him back in the promised few minutes with good news. If he would send IT the files, they’d print them out on a high-end nine-color printer, the type used by professional photographers and have them delivered within the hour. Peter debated whether he should transfer the images to a memory card and walk it down to the IT office, but in the end, he just forwarded the email from Rand Carlyle with a note that the prints had to be delivered by the end of the day, no excuses.

Of course, five o’clock came around and there was no sign of those prints. Peter bid Andrea goodnight and headed down to IT to see what the holdup was.

“You didn’t tell us you were trying to print U.S. currency, Agent Burke. Don’t you know that all modern printers are designed to reject currency prints without the proper overrides?” The technician was a stereotypical geek with thick, black rimmed glasses and Doritos dust in his mustache.

“Can you do the override?”

“Does Rudolph have a bright red nose? Of course, but it takes time and finesse. Can you come back tomorrow?” The man sighed in irritation.

“No, I can’t.” In truth, he could but he didn’t want to.

The technician grumbled, punched in a code, then another code. He called a supervisor, who entered a third code and finally the machine started printing. It wasn’t a quick process and each image required the same override. It was close to six before Peter thanked the guy and returned to his office.

He should have been eager to go home and examine the printouts, but now that he had them in hand, he wasn’t sure what he wanted to do.

Diana had gone home, but Clinton was still at his desk. Peter toyed with the idea of asking the man if he’d like to go for a drink. He wasn’t one of those bosses who were concerned about fraternizing with the junior staff, not that Clinton was junior staff anymore. The brass had finally approved Peter’s field promotion and he was now officially a Supervisory Special Agent.

Clinton looked up from his monitor and rubbed at his face. “Diana mentioned that you had a meeting with some Secret Service agents.”

“That was remarkably indiscreet of her.”

The other agent wasn’t fazed by Peter’s obvious annoyance. “She said they think that they’ve got a bead on some work by Neal.”

Peter sat down at the empty desk next to Clinton’s, feeling unutterably weary. “It could be – but I’m not sure.”

“Any word from the little guy?”

“No, and you know he’s still Theo’s nanny. Di says he shows up every day without fail.”

Clinton nodded. “Those two wouldn’t stay separated for this long. Moz would have just faded away if Neal told him where he was.”

“Yeah.” The word was a sour taste in Peter’s mouth. He’d never been jealous of Neal and Mozzie’s friendship, at least not until now. He was suddenly eager to get home and look at the printouts. “I’m heading out, once I clear through the paperwork waiting for me.”

Clinton looked at the file folder in Peter’s hands, but didn’t say anything.
Peter headed back up to his office, and despite his best intentions, it was still almost two hours before he was able to shut down and leave. Andrea had left a foot-high stack of forms that had to be reviewed and signed. By the time he was done, even Clinton had left.

Satchmo was gratifyingly eager to see him, and to be let out. Peter set the printouts on the coffee table, but forced himself to have dinner, sort through the mail, and clean up before doing what he was aching to do.

Finally, Peter sat down on the couch, opened the folder and pulled out the transparencies. He looked at them and laughed. It was a bitter, unpleasant sound and Satchmo looked at him with doggy concern. After everything he went through to get these, he couldn’t see a damn thing. He held them up to the light, but that didn’t give him the clarity he needed. Peter sat for a moment, tried to think rationally – to problem solve instead of panic.

He asked himself, what would Neal do? That triggered a flash of inspiration and he went to look for the high powered flashlight they used to keep in the bookcase – except that half of the bookcase was still packed for the move that never happened. But he was lucky and found the flashlight where he’d hoped it would be. He cleared off the glass-topped coffee table and set the light underneath, trying to create a makeshift light box. The light was too focused and Peter ran upstairs and took a plain white bed sheet from the linen closet, hoping it would work as a diffuser.

It wasn’t perfect, but it functioned. The beam was bright enough to illuminate the transparency. He arrayed the three “suspect” ones next to each other and tried to find what had pricked at him that afternoon. It wasn’t anything obvious and Peter gritted his teeth in frustration.

He forced himself to relax, to keep thinking like Neal, which made him laugh. Other than Snider’s insinuations, there was no reason to believe that these were Neal’s work.

But still.

Neal liked puzzles as much as he did and one of the reasons why they had just clicked was that Neal not only could keep up, but he’d leapfrog over him, knowing that Peter wouldn’t have any problems following the directions of his thoughts.

If Neal had signed these, he wouldn’t be so obvious to repeat himself. Hiding “NC” under the seal wasn’t worthy of the Neal Caffrey he knew.

And loved.

Peter sat back. Yes, loved. However one defined it, love was the perfect word for his feelings. With that realization came another and bitterer one. He’d let Neal down. He’d been too intent on protecting himself to see what Neal was going through, to understand the magnitude of his loss. His father, Rachel, him. He’d let Neal down and he was going to do everything he could to make it right. Whatever it took, however long it took. He’d bring Neal home and move heaven and earth to set him free. The irony of that thought didn’t escape him.

He turned his attention back to the transparencies and blinked. There was something there, something in the engraved details in Benjamin Franklin’s collar. The images had been enlarged enough to almost fill the eight by eleven transparency sheet, but Peter still needed a magnifying glass. He was lucky again, the one that Neal had given him a few years ago was still on the fireplace mantel. It had been sort of a joke - that Peter could use it to hunt for clues the next time he’d go missing. Peter had laughed back then, he wanted to cry now.

He examined the three images. On each bill, there were minute differences in the tiny lines that made
up a fold in the fabric of Franklin’s neck cloth. On the actually currency, they’d be half or even a quarter of a millimeter long – barely the thickness of a fingernail.

His heart racing, Peter laid one sheet over another, aligning all three images. Those tiny lines – random discrepancies on each note – coalesced into a single coherent line of text.

**adiuvare me petrus**

help me peter.

........................................

He was supposed to be enjoying his retirement. Play golf, travel the country in an RV, spend some time with the grandchildren.

Reese hated golf – he could play if he had to – but he preferred to spend his time doing anything other than smacking a tiny ball across acres of manicured grass and chasing after it. Except maybe steering a gas guzzling behemoth down the highway and stopping at every tourist trap from New York to Los Angeles.

And you had to have children before you had grandchildren. That was the way it worked. In his book, you needed to have a wife before kids, and while colleagues had said that he was married to the Bureau, it wasn’t a sort of marriage that was particularly fertile.

His days weren’t empty, though. He had connections and friends and stayed in the loop as much as he could. For the past six months, he’d been using every one of those contacts and friends to try and find that son of a bitch, Neal Caffrey.

He’d remained skeptical when Peter insisted that Caffrey hadn’t run, but that skepticism was all for show. If he’d given any visible support to Peter’s contention that Caffrey hadn’t disappeared of his own accord, Peter would have gone AWOL again. And no amount of time in The Cave could rescue his career.

So he’d kept his mouth shut, listened to all the chatter, and come up empty, month after month.

At least until this week. His contacts in the NSA told him that someone was trying to move a considerable amount of currency, about twelve million in fake C-notes. The bills were so good that not even the Secret Service was completely certain that they were counterfeit. Another line of chatter put Peter at the Treasury Department this afternoon. Apparently the Secret Service was trying to make a connection to Caffrey and wanted his old friend’s opinion.

Reese didn’t know what to make of these events. He didn’t see Caffrey as a counterfeiter, not like this. For a man like him, there were easier ways to make a quick couple of million – a forged Degas or Monet and a quick sale to a Chinese collector with more money than sense to check the provenance was more Caffrey’s speed. Counterfeiting on a grand scale like this took a lot more resources than Caffrey could ever muster.

He poured himself a glass of scotch and contemplated the problem, only to be interrupted by the doorbell. Retirement didn’t mean stupidity and old habits were hard to break. He took his sidearm out of the lockbox, checked the safety and went to answer the door.

Peter was on the other side of the peephole. Reese reengaged the gun’s safety and opened the door, inviting Peter in.
Peter gave him a rueful smile. “Sorry to bother you so late. Hope I’m not interrupting anything.”

“Nothing more than my nightcap. Want one?”

Peter shook his head.

“I’m guessing that this isn’t simply a social call because Elizabeth isn’t home this weekend and you’re lonely?”

That earned him a startled look. “How did you know that?”

Reese smiled. He knew way too much about far too many things, but there was no need to agitate Peter. “A lucky guess – and an easy one, too. You look like shit. And if Elizabeth was home, you wouldn’t be ringing my doorbell at a quarter to ten on a Wednesday night.”

“Yeah, that’s probably a dead giveaway.” Peter rubbed the back of his neck, unhappiness written in every line in his face.

“So, what brings you here?” Reese returned his old SIG Sauer to the gun safe and noticed the odd assortment of things that Peter was carrying – a file, a flashlight and a white bed sheet. “Looking to tell ghost stories?”

That got him a laugh. “No. Or maybe yes.”

“Let me guess – something to do with Caffrey.”

Peter nodded. He looked around the room, eyes settling on a small glass-topped table next to Reese’s favorite chair. “May I?”

“Be my guest.” He waved a hand for Peter to go ahead, watched in fascination as he set the flashlight under the table, draped the sheet over it and opened the file. He carefully set the contents on the table, over the brightest point. Peter pulled out a magnifying glass, looked at his set up, made a few minute adjustments and asked him to come over.

“Tell me what you see.” There was so much hope, so much fear in the man’s voice that Reese was almost afraid to look. He took the magnifying glass from Peter and looked at a carefully stacked set of transparencies – enlargements of 1991 series U.S. Hundred dollar bills.

“Do you see it?”

Reese didn’t know what he was looking for. “My eyes aren’t as young as yours, Peter. Give me a second.”

“Focus on the portrait.” That was the only instruction Peter gave.

He examined it, from the top of the frame around Franklin, down the long hair, but nothing stood out. The process was slow and he could feel the tension radiating from Peter. He bent closer, careful not to disturb the transparencies. There was something there, in the fold of Franklin’s collar, just above the fur. He blinked and looked again. Three tiny words.

He almost dropped the magnifying glass in shock. “What the hell? Peter?”

“You see it?”

“Of course I do!” He put the magnifying glass down, surprised at how badly his hands were shaking.
“He’s out there – someone’s forced him to do this and he’s trying to get word to me.” Peter sounded like he was begging to be believed.

“Of all the Hail Mary plays I’ve ever seen, this one …” His voice trailed off and he was stunned by the magnitude of Caffrey’s skill, the hope he had in Peter, in the Bureau.

“I know, I know. This almost defies logic. If I take it back to Treasury, they aren’t going to believe me. All they’ll hear is that this is Caffrey’s work and the manhunt will escalate.”

Reese nodded, in absolute agreement. “Did Treasury say how long they think these notes have been in circulation?”

“Damn it, I didn’t ask. The agents were more interested in proving they had the biggest dicks in the room. I was pissed off. Off my game.”

“You were never very good with inter-agency politics.”

Peter gave him a wry grin. “Yeah, going to D.C. would have been a disaster.”

Reese retrieved his scotch and swallowed the dregs. He needed the false courage the alcohol gave him for what he had to tell Peter. “I never believed that Caffrey ran. I’ve been looking for him.”

Peter, though, didn’t seem surprised. “And you’ve found nothing.”

“Pretty much, but sometimes ‘nothing’ really isn’t nothing. Some friends let me know that a large quantity of counterfeit hundreds was on the move. It could be tied to this.” He gestured at the transparencies.

“So – do we let it play out?”

“I think we’ll have to.”

Peter looked like he wanted to disagree.

He held up a hand, insisting, “It’s the logical thing to do.” Reese knew that logic had little to do with Peter’s feelings about Neal.

“I can’t wait, Reese. I can’t sit back and wait for someone else to fuck this up. Neal needs me – he’s begging me for help. Me. I’ve let him down enough.”

Reese wasn’t sure what that last bit was about, but he understood Peter’s sense of urgency. If someone had kidnapped Neal and forced him to create these plates, it wasn’t hard to make the leap that they’d dispose of Neal once the job was finished. “Do what you have to do, but remember it’ll be that much harder to protect Neal if you don’t have a badge.”
Sometime in Late January – Thursday Morning

“You’ve heard nothing from Neal?” June asked for the twentieth time.

Moz just shook his head.

“I’ve always known that if Neal had to leave, he’d leave without saying goodbye. But he’d eventually find a way to let me know he was all right.”

“I know. I know.” Mozzie sipped the cup of excellent tea June had poured, but with little enthusiasm.

“He did get in touch with me when the two of you took off to Cape Verde. He sent a postcard.” June drifted over to a small keepsake box on a credenza and opened it. She had a card in her hand, one of Monet’s Haystacks. There was no message – it was the card itself that had been the message. All is well, I’m safe.

“But this time, he’s sent nothing. It’s been six months and nothing.” June put the card back and returned to the couch, looking nothing like her usually vibrant self. “I worry so much.”

Moz had no words of comfort to offer her. He had no comfort for himself.

They sat there, the silence a pressing weight, making it hard to breathe, to think. But he’d come for a purpose.

“June – would you mind if I went upstairs for a moment?”

“To Neal’s apartment?”

Moz debated lying, and lying lost. “No, there’s something I need to check in Byron’s study. Something Neal told me about.”

June just raised an elegant eyebrow and stood up. “The flexographic?”

“You know about it?” Mozzie was surprised. June had never hinted that she’d known about the printing plate that her husband had stolen from Ford and secreted away.

“Yes, I always have.” June’s sigh said everything that her words didn’t. “Why do you need to check on it?”

“That, dear lady, is something you’re better off not knowing.”

“Something to do with Neal?”

Moz didn’t answer, hoping his silence would speak for itself.

June got up and gestured for him to lead the way.

Moz had been in Byron’s study a few times over the years, mostly to stare at the credenza with longing. Just knowing that the flexographic was there was enough. He’d dreamed about endless streams of money, the security that it could buy, but now, those dreams seemed sinister, wrong. He had nothing but a terrible feeling in his belly that Neal was somehow involved in the currency Clive was trying to sell.
June went straight to the credenza, reached underneath and activated the mechanism that revealed the hidden compartment.

Moz didn’t know what to feel. The flexographic plate was still there and in the dimly lit room, it glowed like an evil thing.

Olivia didn’t bother leaving a message for Amaro to meet her at Sinai-Roosevelt before heading to the station that morning. She’d tag him if she needed him. And she doubted she’d need him. The stab wound that Donna had told her missed the JD’s lung hadn’t, and the man had been rushed back into surgery. He was intubated and it might be days before he could talk.

But they’d finally gotten around to doing a rape kit. No DNA, but there were clear signs of long term trauma – scarring and tearing and deep bruising, in addition to the whip marks, Taser burns and the massive abrasions around his ankle and throat.

The report also noted that the victim was showing signs of a vitamin D deficiency. He was malnourished and likely had been kept indoors for several months.

This wasn’t anything that Olivia hadn’t seen before. On young girls and women kept as sex slaves, likely smuggled in from Eastern Europe on the promise of a better life. This case was unusual only because the victim was male, in his mid-thirties, and from the look of his dental work, probably American.

The hospital provided a DNA sample, but the results could take weeks. Olivia considered having his fingerprints taken, but this wasn’t technically a crime scene, and identifying a living victim was low on the overtaxed lab’s priority. She’d probably have better luck going through the missing persons reports.

Or having Amaro go through them.

Theo was fretting and a little feverish from the new tooth coming in. He’d cried on and off through the night and nothing seemed to soothe him. Her mother, a wise woman, simply said “Glenfiddich – rub a tiny drop on his gums and take a glass for yourself, you’ll both be happier.”

Diana didn’t want to give her nine month-old son whiskey, but after rocking him for the last eight hours to no avail, she took her mother’s advice – at least with regards to the drop on his gums. She had to go to work today, and the way she felt right now, even half a dram would render her comatose.

Theo grimaced at the taste, but to her relief, he quieted almost immediately.

“There’s my boy, shut your eyes and go to sleep.” Diana hummed a little lullaby as Theo fell asleep. She couldn’t keep a tune if her life depended on it, but her son didn’t care.

She put him in his crib, turned on the baby monitor and waited for Mozzie to arrive. They’d gone through this before and he knew not to ring the bell, to send her a text when he arrived. Which was why she was ready to commit bloody murder when the buzzer rang. Theo started screaming and Diana pulled open the door, about to tear off the little man’s head, only to find Peter there, looking like hell.

Theo’s cries went up another notch in volume and she pulled her boss inside. “Wait here. I need – ”
Peter waved her off, understanding that her son took priority. Despite her aching need to pick her baby up and comfort him, she listened to the advice of her mother, her pediatrician, even Mozzie himself, and just rubbed Theo’s back, stroking him gently until he hiccupped once, then once more before yawning and falling back to sleep.

Diana was exhausted, but this was the life she’d chosen for herself and as her mother said, she was looking at a lifetime of sleepless nights, so she’d better get used to it. She went to the bathroom, washed her face and went back out to face the world.

Or at least Peter, who was sitting in her living room, still looking like hell.

“What’s the matter, boss?”

All he said was, “I have to talk with Mozzie.”

“Neal?” Diana swallowed, wondering if Peter had gotten the news they’d all been dreading.

“Yeah.”

“Is he –?” She couldn’t finish the thought.

“No, at least I don’t think so.” Peter lifted up a manila envelope he’d brought with him. “I have a clue, but I need to talk to Moz first.”

“Is this about yesterday? The meeting with the Secret Service?”

He nodded. “I found something – it’s incredible but …” Peter shook his head. “It’s almost unreal. I’ll show you when we get to the office.”

Her phone buzzed with an incoming text and Diana went to the door. It was Mozzie.

“How’s Teddy?”

Diana didn’t bother to correct him about her son’s name. “He’s sleeping, at last.”

“Another tooth?”

She nodded.

“Ah, well. Did you try some whiskey?”

Diana grinned. Her mother and her son’s nanny would get along just fine. Under better circumstances, she’d actually look forward to their meeting. But now, she had other – more urgent issues. “There’s someone here who needs to talk to you.” She headed into the living room, expecting Moz to follow.

Peter stood up, a terrible look in his eyes. “Mozzie.”

The little guy stopped in his tracks and Diana could see all of the joy leech from his face. “Neal?”

“I have a lead …”

“How solid?”

“Solid enough – but before I tell you anything, there’s something I need to know. Has anyone contacted you about counterfeit hundred dollar bills?”
Moz didn’t answer, but Diana could read the truth on his face. So could Peter.

“Damn it, Mozzie – this is Neal. His life may depend on it.”

Moz stalled. “Someone might have…”

“I don’t have time for your word games. Did anyone reach out to you about a large quantity of Series 1991 hundreds?”

Moz licked his lips, still stalling.

“Please, Moz.” Peter’s desperation was clear.

“Okay, okay – an acquaintance I’ve done business with – may be hooked into a quantity of C-notes. He says that the bills are clean but his seller needs to move them quickly and is willing to take a deep discount. I might have expressed some interest in assisting with the transaction.”

Diana wasn’t sure what to do. Moz had all but admitted to conspiracy to traffic in counterfeit currency, conspiracy to aid and abet in avoidance of currency transaction reporting laws, money laundering, and probably a dozen other felonies. Peter caught her eye and shook his head. That wasn’t the point here.

“Moz – I need to get to the source of that currency.”

“You think Neal’s behind this?”

Peter didn’t hesitate. “Yes.”

“Why?”

Peter took a deep breath and seemed to debate something within himself. “Some bills have been picked up by the Secret Service…”

She was surprised at how candid Peter was.

“And they think that they are Neal’s work?”

“Yes – but I don’t think he was a willing participant in this.”

Moz blinked. “Why – why do you say that?”

Peter shook his head. “I can’t tell you that. Not yet. You’ll have to trust me.”

Moz paced the length of the room. “But you’re sure?”

“Yes. I’m absolutely sure it’s Neal.”

Moz opened his mouth and shut it; he seemed to be fighting his own internal battles. “I think I can arrange something – I can’t give up my contact, but maybe I can get him to give up his source.”

Diana had to step in. “Mozzie, this is Neal we’re talking about. Your best friend! You’d protect someone who might have a connection to the people who took him?”

“I can’t – I can’t burn him without being sure. You don’t understand!” Mozzie’s voice pitched up in a loud wail. If he had hair, he’d be tearing at it.
Peter intervened. “Diana – it’s okay.” He reached out and put a hand on Moz’s shoulder. “Calm down – let’s figure out how to do this. We’ve done this before, remember?”

Diana wasn’t completely sure what Peter was talking about, but she suspected that it had something to do with U-boat loot, Matthew Keller and Elizabeth Burke’s kidnapping. Peter had deliberately never told her the whole story. But whatever it was, it worked. Mozzie nodded and an understanding passed between the two men.

There were people around him, unfamiliar sounds and smells. He kept his eyes shut as he tried to figure out where he was.

What was happening to him.

What had happened to him.

His memory was scattered, filled with holes, gaping pits of lost time that he didn’t want to recover.

A hand rubbed his arm, the touch surprisingly gentle. There was a voice and he knew that it belonged to a woman. It had been so long since he’d heard a woman’s voice. That was something he knew.

“Can you open your eyes?”

He didn’t want to.

The hand didn’t stop its gentle stroking. “Please, open your eyes.”

He listened beyond the voice. There were soft pings – machines. And squeaks, less rhythmic and those faded and grew louder. He wondered if those sounds were made by shoes against a smooth floor.

He tried to identify the odors around him. It was hard, there was something in his nose and he opened his mouth to breathe. That hurt. His throat felt like fire. Like something had been shoved down it and pulled out, repeatedly.

He began to panic at that memory, thrashing at the hand on his arm, trying to pull away, to get away.

The machine noises grew louder and there were people shouting. More squeaks, more words and more hands and he struggled but they wouldn’t let him go.

He needed to get free, he needed to escape. He needed to save himself because no one was going to come and save him.

Peter would never find him.

Peter

He stopped struggling. It all felt so hopeless. Peter was gone. The pain of that thought burst through him and he heard himself moan. He sounded like an animal.

It was only fitting, since he’d been used like an animal. Set to work and beaten if he didn’t fulfill his tasks. He wasn’t human; he was a thing to be used, to be used up and discarded when all his value was destroyed.
Peter would never do that. Peter might be angry at him, he might even regret their association, he might even turn his back on him and deny that they were ever friends, but Peter would never hurt him like this.

Peter would be so disappointed in him.

The voices and the hands receded. The light behind his eyelids faded and so did the panic. He breathed deep and before he lost consciousness, he remembered his name.

Neal
Sometime in Late January – Friday Evening

Peter sat in his office and looked out over the empty bullpen. It was nearly six and the National Weather Service had issued yet another winter storm watch. The prospect of getting snowed in was enough to send even the most ambitious of his agents home.

The only other person left was Allen, the guard, who stayed on shift until the doors locked at seven.

Peter scrubbed at his face, disgusted and tired and angry. How the hell did his life, his career, come to this? Or maybe this was just what he deserved? After all, wasn’t everything he had built upon a lie, a crime?

No.

No, it wasn’t. He’d never told anyone, but he’d pieced together what happened between Hagen, Andrew Dawson – the AUSA who had pursued his case – and Neal. It was all there in Rachel Turner’s meticulously kept files. When Neal first disappeared, Peter had suspected that she was responsible. But that time he didn’t make the mistake of bringing her to the FBI offices. He had swallowed his nausea and his bad memories and went to the Metropolitan Correction Center to talk to her.

She had been, if possible, even crazier than before and he got nothing useful out of her. So Peter went through her files and started reading. Thinking about that now chilled him.

It seemed like the deck had been stacked against him from the very beginning. If he hadn’t been accused of killing Pratt, it would have been something else to put Neal into their clutches. Turner’s notes suggested all sorts of heinous crimes that could be pinned on him: not only murder, but corruption charges, witness tampering, even an inappropriate relationship with Neal. His role in the senator’s death just fell into their hands like manna from heaven. The timing was perfect.

Neal had no choice. They boxed him in, played him, pulled all the right strings. And Neal danced his way right into their trap.

After everything, Rachel, Hagen, the damned diamond, he’d smoothed things over with Neal. But he’d never apologized for what he’d said, and worse he’d never thanked Neal. And he couldn’t help but fear that he’d never have the chance to make things right between them. The feeling of failure was inescapable.

And today’s events only made it worse.

He’d gone down to the Treasury Department with such hope. He had a plan for bringing down the counterfeiting ring – or at least getting close to it. He’d convinced Moz to be his stalking horse, promising to protect him and, if possible, his own source. He put together the operation, following the damn rule book to the letter and was very firmly told, “We’ll take it from here.”

Just an escort out of the office and down to the street like he was a suspected shoplifter. Not even a thank you.

He didn’t bother calling Bruce, not that he was the type to complain to the brass. His one-time mentor called him just as he got back to his desk. The conversation was only slightly less humiliating than the meeting with Secret Service.
Bruce was, as he’d put it, fed up with him. This insistence that Caffrey was an innocent player in a counterfeiting scheme was ludicrous. And yes – he’d been told about the so-called message that he’d discovered in Franklin’s portrait. Computer forensics couldn’t replicate the words, what Peter had seen was a combination of printer artifacts and his vivid imagination.

Peter didn’t believe that was seeing things, that it was just a fortuitous printing error. He’d seen the knowledge in Carlyle’s deliberately blank expression, in Snider’s smirk, when he’d put the stacked bills on the projector. They knew about those words before they’d even called Peter down to the Treasury Department the first time. Peter didn’t say that Hughes had seen the message too. There was no point.

They wanted to pin this on Neal and there was nothing Peter could do or say that would change their minds. To them, Peter Burke was compromised and could no longer be trusted to uphold his oaths.

That wasn’t news; Peter had known that for a long time. He’d tried to deny it that night he’d gone to Neal’s and told him that he was getting him a new handler, but that was only delaying the inevitable. And that turned into a clusterfuck of epic proportions.

_A dead agent. A ruined friendship._

Peter hadn’t argued. He sat and listened and when Bruce finished, he said nothing more than “have a good night” before hanging up.

Walking back to the office, Peter had stopped at a small corner store, bought an unlocked burner phone with cash, and did something he’d never done before, not even with Neal. He crossed the line and sent a message to Mozzie that he’d lost control of the operation and to be careful. Peter didn’t wait for a reply. He pulled the SIM card and crushed it under his heel.

Another corner store, another unregistered SIM card. If he learned anything from Moz, it was how not to leave a trail.

Now, Peter sat at his desk and stared out at the skyline. He felt as aimless as the snowflakes drifting out of the clouds. He didn’t know what he was fighting for, what he was fighting against. It certainly wasn’t about justice anymore.

Voices distracted him. Allen was talking with a woman; she seemed to be holding a badge. Peter got up and went to the railing, his gut suddenly roiling.

“Is there a problem?”

Allen had opened his mouth, about to answer when the woman strode across the room, her badge held in front of her like a talisman. “Sergeant Olivia Benson, NYPD – I’m looking for Special Agent Clinton Jones. Can you tell me where he is?” Sergeant Benson looked up at him. “Who are you?”

“Special Agent Peter Burke, his boss. I’m the ASAC for the White Collar division. Clinton’s gone home for the day. What do you need with him?”

“I have a victim who told me to reach out to Agent Clinton Jones at the White Collar division.”

Peter’s heart raced. It couldn’t be … “Victim? Does this person have a name?”

The cop grimaced. “It’s odd, he wouldn’t talk to anyone at the hospital and was extremely reluctant to talk with the police. He finally gave a name, but I have the feeling it’s not his real one. The only thing he’d say to us was ‘tell Agent Jones that Danny Brooks hasn’t been living the dream.’ Do you know what this means? Do you know who Danny Brooks is?”

Peter closed his eyes and said a short prayer to a god he didn’t think he believed in. “Yes, I know
who Danny Brooks is. He’s been missing for six months.” Peter swallowed, shaken out of his joy when he realized what the cop had told him. “You said he was a victim? A crime victim?”

“Is Mr. Brooks an agent?”

Peter took a deep breath, explaining Neal Caffrey to a stranger was always difficult. “Let’s go up to my office – it will be easier to talk there.” Not that he wanted to sit down and talk, he wanted to get to Neal, but rushing into the situation without all of the information could be dangerous. He needed to find out just what the hell had happened to Neal.

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Olivia wasn’t unfamiliar with the FBI. She’d worked with the Bureau on some pretty horrific cases over the years, but this was the first time she’d ever crossed paths with White Collar, one of the FBI’s more rarified units, and she’d never dealt with an ASAC before.

What was truly interesting was how emotionally invested the agent seemed in this ‘Danny Brooks’. He’d tried to hide it, but there was a strong flash of happiness when she mentioned the name. Agent Burke wasn’t going to be so happy when he heard what had happened to the man.

“Can you tell me who Danny Brooks is?” Olivia figured she’d come out swinging.

Burke smiled. “This is going to be an interesting experience – are we actually going to interrogate each other?”

She nodded, but wasn’t going to give an inch. “Who is Danny Brooks? I can keep this quiet if it’s a deep cover alias.”

“It is an alias, but not like you think. Danny Brooks is an alias for …” Burke sighed and shook his head before continuing, “a CI who had been embedded in this unit for nearly three years. His real name is Neal Caffrey, and he disappeared almost exactly six months ago. Now, tell me what happened to him.”

She didn’t sugarcoat anything. “Three days ago, a man was dumped out of a white van near 12th Avenue on the West Side. He’d been stabbed and needed emergency surgery. The victim wasn’t able to talk until late this afternoon.”

“What aren’t you telling me?”

Of course Burke could tell that she hadn’t given him the whole story. Olivia said softly, as if to cushion the blow, “I’m with the Manhattan Special Victims Unit, Agent Burke. I was called onto the case because the victim’s condition indicated long term abuse.”

Burke didn’t blink, but even in the dim office light, she could see how pale he’d gotten. “Rape?”

“Yes, but I was called in because it seemed like the vic – excuse me, Mr. Caffrey – had been kept locked up and was abused for a long time.” She sighed; she'd been doing this for more years than she wanted to count and there was still no easy way to tell someone this. “He looked like he’d been tortured.” When Burke didn’t interrupt, she added some details. “There were Taser burns, whip marks, abrasions on his throat and ankles that look similar to scars we’ve seen on people who’ve been kept shackled.”

Burke still didn’t say anything. He looked like a man in shock.

Olivia had to ask. “Do you know Mr. Caffrey well?”
“Yes, I do.” Burke got up. “I need to see him, now. Where is he?”

“Mt. Sinai-Roosevelt.”

“Right around the fucking corner. Let’s go.” Burke holstered his gun and gestured for her to precede him.

They were on the street, walking against the blowing snow when Burke stopped and turned to her. “Did you do anything to try to identify Neal while he was unconscious?”

“I had a DNA sample submitted to the crime lab, but that will take weeks to come back.”

“Fingerprints? Did you take his prints?”

“No, but if he hadn’t regained consciousness, I probably would have.” The urgency in Burke’s question bothered her. “Would that have been a problem?”

“Of epic proportions. Neal – I didn’t tell you – was working out the balance of a four year sentence before he disappeared. The FBI found his skills useful.” Burke practically spat out that last word and Olivia had to wonder about the anger there. “He’d been on a GPS tracking anklet, which went dark when he disappeared six months ago. It took three weeks for the Marshals to find the broken unit in the back of a flatbed truck that had been making a delivery to Maryland. Neal was listed as an escaped fugitive.”

Ahhh. “That’s why he didn’t want to give us his name.”

“And that’s why running his prints would have been disastrous. It would have triggered a hell of a lot of alarms in the system. When it comes to Caffrey, the Marshals have a hard time being reasonable. They probably would have shipped him back to prison regardless of his condition, claiming that he’d set the whole thing up.”

Burke grabbed her arm. Olivia should have shaken him off, but the anguish in his eyes stopped her. “You have to promise me that no one knows who the man in that hospital room really is.”

“Is he dangerous?”

“No, Neal’s not violent, not in the least. He’s a con man. He was a con man. He’d gone straight.”

Burke didn’t seem like a man who’d be fooled too easily, and she trusted him. “Okay, you have my word. Until you tell me otherwise, the only name in my report is Danny Brooks. Will the Marshals have a flag on that identity?”

Burke actually laughed. “After all this time, it’s doubtful.”

Olivia had no idea what he meant by that, but there were a lot of questions she had that she still needed answers for.
Sometime in Late January – Friday Evening

It was such a strange feeling. Safety.

Neal rested his hands on top of the blankets, rolling the worn white cotton between his fingers. To be clean, unshackled, warm. It seemed like a miracle.

Doctors had been in, they poked and prodded and made pronouncements. Neal didn’t say anything, he didn’t ask questions. He didn’t meet their eyes and they seemed to go out of their way to avoid looking at his face.

He was a case, a patient with an interesting wound, nothing more. That was fine with him.

The nurses were a little better. Some were unfailingly cheerful, but all of them were competent and careful not to hurt him any more than they had to. That was a novel sensation.

There were two people he didn’t like and he didn’t want to see, but they wouldn’t leave him alone. The police.

He’d had plenty of experience with the PD, mostly making them run around in circles. But these two seemed a cut above the boys and girls in blue. The sergeant was a woman with a thousand-yard stare and an infinite well of compassion. The detective was intense, eager for facts, like a dog with a bone.

He didn’t want to face that compassion; he didn’t want to deal with that intensity. They wanted answers that he didn’t want to give.

Like his name.

It was too dangerous to do that. He was certain that Neal Caffrey was on a BOLO that went to every police department and law enforcement agency in the world. Probably along with every other alias that he’d ever used with the FBI.

But the police were persistent and he figured that if he didn’t offer them a name, they’d take his prints and find out everything he didn’t want them to find out. After that, the Marshals would take him from this comfortable, safe, clean hospital bed and throw him into a prison medical unit where he’d be shackled and left to rot.

Giving them ‘Danny Brooks’ was a calculated risk. There was no criminal record associated with that name and since he’d turned eighteen and willingly left WitSec, there were no flags on it in the Marshals’ records. Of that, he was certain. Mozzie had checked.

Asking for Clinton was another risk. They weren’t precisely friends and Clinton knew better than to trust him. Clinton was also someone who believed that he should have served out his sentence. He’d told him that before he’d testified at his commutation hearing. But Clinton Jones was also a man who believed in fairness and that justice wasn’t an abstract concept to be enforced in strict accordance with words in a book.

So he told the sergeant to ask for Clinton, to tell him that Danny Brooks wasn’t living the dream, and he hoped that the man remembered the conversation they once had over some very excellent scotch. He hoped that Clinton would be decent enough to come himself and ask for an explanation before sending the Marshals.
Neal wondered if he should call Moz. Except he didn’t know if his friend was even still in New York or if any of his cell phones were working. He had disappeared without a word. Moz always said he was old school, and old school meant never saying goodbye. When it was time to go, you just left and didn’t look back.

Except that Moz knew that Neal always looked back, he always said goodbye. *Almost always.*

A nurse came in, changed the bag on his IV, and asked if he was in pain. He smiled and said he was fine for now. She actually argued with him – that being “fine for now” wasn’t fine and wasn’t going to help him heal. He told her that he didn’t want the fog that the drugs would bring. At least not until he was ready to sleep. Then he’d need something that would knock him out, to give him some succor from the demons that chased him through his dreams. She reiterated that it was important to manage the pain and it would help him heal and recover faster.

They talked about options - he wanted ibuprofen, she said that he already had too much of that and offered Percocet, instead. Neal had taken that before and he was prepared for the floating, detached sensations that the medication caused. What he wasn’t prepared for was how completely the painkiller dismantled the walls he’d built around his psyche. As the pain receded, his thoughts took dark and dangerous turns.

He didn’t want to think about Peter. He didn’t want to think about Peter. He didn’t want to think about Peter.

And yet he couldn’t stop thinking about Peter, wondering if he was happy, if he liked being a Section Chief. If he missed him. If he cared about what had happened to him. If he had even looked for him.

Behind his closed eyes, fantasies played out of Peter finding his hidden message, of Peter busting down the door and rescuing him. He could feel Peter hugging him, telling him how much he’d missed him, how everything was all right now.

Neal hated those dreams; he hated himself for indulging in them. Because they never came true. Peter was in Washington, he was a big shot, a big deal, and he didn’t need Neal Caffrey anymore. Peter never found the message and his kidnappers used him up and killed him. He could feel the knife sliding into him. It didn’t hurt any worse than any of the other things they’d done.

Memories cascaded, words echoing in his brain. Words he wanted to deny ever saying but he couldn’t deny the truth of them.

"Out of all the people in my life, Mozzie, even Kate, you know, you're the only one."

"The only one what?"

"The only person in my life I trust."

As he sat in that stinking cell, chained to the wall, battered and damaged, he trusted Peter. He trusted that Peter would rescue him, would find him, would come and take him out of this living hell.

When he realized that Peter was never going to come for him, that Peter was going to let them keep doing these things to him – hurting him – he wished they’d just kill him and be done with it.

Maybe some wishes did come true. Maybe he was dead.

And the dark train of his thoughts kept lurching forward like some terrible and ungainly monster. As much as he tried not to remember, Neal could still hear the words Peter had said to Clinton that
terrible day – how he’d regret taking Neal on. Making it clear that he’d regretted taking Neal on. That Neal was nothing but trouble, and not worth the pain he’d bring. Maybe Peter wanted to get rid of him, maybe those last few weeks, working together like it was old times was just an illusion. Maybe Peter hated him, wanted him gone, wanted to forget he ever existed…

“Mr. Brooks? Danny?” Someone called his name softly. He didn’t respond. It was the police. He recognized her voice, the woman who’d tried to get him to talk. The one he’d sent away with the message for Clinton. “Neal?” she whispered.

At that, his eyes snapped open. He wasn’t too far gone to make the connection. She must have spoken to Clinton.

“Hey.” What a wonderfully all-purpose word, so useful in situations like this. “Sergeant Benson, right? I remember you.”

“Yes. How are you feeling?”

Neal shrugged and regretted the gesture as it pulled at the incision, at the scabs and scars on his neck and back and shoulders. Because the cop was a stranger and even as drugged out as he was, he knew that lying would be easier, “Okay, maybe a little better.” His voice sounded so slurred. “I guess you talked to Clinton … Agent Jones?” When are the Marshals coming?

“No, actually I didn’t. He was gone for the day. I spoke with his boss, though.”

Neal’s heart sank. She’d talked with some bright and shiny new ASAC who was probably all too eager to close the case on Neal Caffrey, escaped felon, fugitive from justice. No, wait – that wasn’t right, but he couldn’t think why, he couldn’t make his brain work. He closed his eyes and tried to shut everything else out, tried to make sense of this. He finally grasped the missing piece – the new ASAC wouldn’t know about Danny Brooks.

“Neal?”

That voice, he knew that voice, he’d heard it in his dreams and his nightmares. Sometimes he thought it would be the last sound he ever would hear. Peter. His eyes snapped open and there was a figment of his imagination standing there. His best friend, his bête noir.

He didn’t understand what was going on. Peter wasn’t supposed to be here, he was in Washington, not here in New York. The confusion made him panic and he began to hyperventilate. “No, no, no – ” He kept his eyes squeezed shut and turned his face away from that voice, away from the pain, the betrayal.

“Neal?” The voice repeated his name, like a monk at prayer.

This wasn’t right. Why was Peter standing there, looking like he’d just had a long day at the office? Like nothing was wrong, like nothing had changed? Something in him snapped, something unreasoning and unreasonable.

Words spewed out of him, words he had no control over, words that tasted like poison. “This is your fault. Your fault!” He was screaming and the pain was a thing trying to rip itself out of his gut. “You did this, you bastard. You forgot about me and left me to die!” He tried to get out of bed, to get to Peter, to make him realize what had happened because he never found him.

Because he never looked for him.

Monitors starting squealing and medical people rushed in, holding him down. He thrashed and
screamed and tried to claw his way free.

The blackness, when it came, was a mercy.
Chapter 7

Sometime in Late January – Friday Evening

Pushed aside by the nurses and aides as they rushed into Neal’s room, Peter stood and watched for a minute, then another. He watched as Neal fought and screamed. He watched as Neal was put into restraints and given a sedative. He stood there and watched as order was restored, as Neal became quiescent, falling into a drugged sleep.

He didn’t even realize that Sergeant Benson was standing next to him, a witness to this terrible moment, until she said, “Come on, and let me buy you a cup of coffee.” Numb, he let her guide him towards the elevators.

The part of him that was an FBI agent figured that this offer wasn’t one made solely from compassion. She was a cop investigating a crime where the victim just put the blame squarely on him.

The hospital coffee shop was quiet and she pushed him into a seat in a booth towards the back. He sat there, waiting, staring out into nothingness, still hearing Neal screaming at him, “This is all your fault. You did this to me. I’m like this because of you, you bastard. You forgot about me and left me to die!”

Benson came back with two cups of coffee, pushing one towards him. Peter made no move to take it. “I suppose you have a few questions.”

“Yeah, just a few.” She smiled wryly.

Peter took a deep breath and tried not to let the heartbreak destroy him. “I know I gave you just the bare bones before, how Neal was a CI working off a four-year sentence.”

Benson nodded, “I had the feeling that there was a lot more to the story. An embedded CI seems, well, unusual. And I didn’t think that Federal prisoners got parole.”

“Oh, unusual doesn’t begin to describe it. And what I didn’t tell you was that Neal is my friend. He might have been a CI, but he was – he is – one of my closest friends. His disappearance has been … difficult.” Peter laughed bitterly. “Difficult – what a fucking stupid word. He disappeared and half of my life was ripped away.”

Benson, thankfully, didn’t remark on what he’d just revealed. “So you’ve known Neal for a while?”

“About a decade, give or take.” Peter finally picked up the coffee cup, more out of the need to do something with his hands. “I was assigned to a simple bond forgery case and discovered a master con artist.”

“You sound like you admired him.”

“I did. Not his crimes, of course, but his intelligence, his creativity. It also helped that Neal didn’t have a mean bone in his body. He’d walk away from a score if it meant hurting someone.”

“So, how did he get from serving time for bond forgery to working for your unit?”

“He managed to break out of Sing-Sing with three months left on his sentence to chase after his girlfriend. They gave him another four years for that. I’d been working on a case … ” Peter had to
swallow the sourness that memories of Curtis Hagen now brought. He worked past that and told Benson how Neal convinced him to take him on, how he promised not to run.

The coffee was a bitter memory by the time he’d finished the story of Neal Caffrey and Peter Burke. It was a carefully edited version, he’d skirted around Neal’s complicity in the U-boat treasure, about the role Neal had played in his own “exoneration” in Pratt’s shooting. But it felt remarkably good to tell a stranger about the two of them, how they worked together. Something in him settled, some of the grief eased.

Of course Benson still had questions. This was still something of an interrogation. “Why do you think he blames you?”

“I’ve always found Neal, no matter how hard he tried to hide, no matter how far he ran; I was always just a step or two behind. But this time, I didn’t find him.” Peter buried his head in his hands. “I didn’t find him.”

“And you have no idea who would have done this to him? Why someone would have kidnapped and tortured him? Do you think it’s someone from his past? Someone that he might have crossed when he was working with the FBI?”

“I don’t know. The Marshals were convinced that Neal ran. I was ordered to keep out of it.”

“But you didn’t.”

“No, of course not. One of the first things I did was go through old case files and check on the status of every criminal that Neal helped me put away. I found nothing.” He wasn’t even going to start trying to explain Rachel Turner.

“But you know something, don’t you?” Benson was relentless.

He took a deep breath, committing himself to a path that he couldn’t see the end of. “Listen, I really shouldn’t be telling you this, but I’m going to need your help when the shit hits the fan.”

“My help, how?”

“Two days ago, I was called into a meeting with the Secret Service about some counterfeit currency that they seemed to believe was linked to Neal.”

“Was it?”

Peter nodded. “Yes, but it’s not as easy as that. I told you that the Marshals and the Justice Department were convinced that Neal ran. They believe that he was actively involved in the counterfeiting and they’re going to stick with that story.”

“Actively as in ‘voluntarily’?”

“Yes, and they are going to make things very difficult for Neal. They’ll revoke his parole and try to stick him with a life sentence for running. That’s why I’m going to need your help.”

“The man in that hospital bed was tortured and left for dead. That doesn’t seem to indicate voluntary participation in anything.”

“You know that, I know that, but Neal was once one of the world’s great con artists and they are going to argue that this is all a setup, an elaborate trick. All they’ll see is Neal Caffrey, con man and escaped felon – someone who once outsmarted them at every turn, someone who made them look
“I have to get out in front of this. It will go better for Neal if I go to the Marshals, the Justice Department and the Secret Service first, instead of letting them find out in a few days – because they will find out that he’s here. You can help by supporting Neal, if it comes to it, telling the Justice Department that what happened to him was not voluntary, consensual – whatever. That he’s the victim here. I’m too close, my judgment is too suspect. I’m the first to admit that when it comes to Neal, I have no perspective. Can I count on you to be the voice of reason?”

Benson hesitated for a moment, understanding the ramifications of what she was agreeing to. But when she agreed, there was no equivocation. “Absolutely.”

“Thank you.” Peter started thinking about all the things he needed to do, all the wheels to be set in motion, all of the favors he’d have to call in. And yet, he sat, unable to move.

“How do you want to go back up to Neal’s room? He might be more rational now.”

Given Neal’s emotional state, it was the last thing that Peter wanted to do. “No – I have to get back to my office. I’ve got a long night ahead of me.”

Benson offered him some advice. “Your friend has been through a terrible experience and he’s on a lot of pain meds. He didn’t know what he was saying. Don’t take it to heart.”

Peter thanked her, but he knew that Neal had meant every word he said.

It was close to eleven when Elizabeth, both exhilarated and exhausted, let herself into her Georgetown apartment.

The storm walloping the Northeast had skipped the DC area altogether, just some rain and not even a lot of that. The dinner with the French cultural attaché, Georges Delahaute, went perfectly. She had little to do with the actual substance of the discussions – a loan of four significant Monets – but she was the one who did all the work, made all of the arrangements for the dinner. It was just like what she did at Burke Premier, but on a scale that she’d never experienced before she started working at the National Gallery.

The gallery directors had been quick to take advantage of her organizational talents, her diplomatic skills, and her knowledge of the art world and she quickly proved herself to be an asset. High profile meetings and dinners like tonight were becoming her stock and trade.

Elizabeth loved her life. Working long hours was nothing new, but not having to manage a household and a husband was. She knew she should have felt guilty about leaving Peter behind in New York, especially with Neal missing. She knew just how big a hole that left in Peter, and her own absence wasn’t making it any better.

She’d never said anything, but Peter knew that she thought Neal ran. She didn’t blame Neal – he’d been used and abused by the FBI for too long and he deserved his freedom. On that, she and Peter agreed. What they’d never agree on was that not only didn’t she blame Neal for running, she approved of it wholeheartedly.

Maybe that was why she’d become so reluctant to head back to New York on the weekends, why
she’d find excuses to stay in Georgetown. So she didn’t have to see her husband work himself to the bone trying to find someone who didn’t want to be found. Someone who shouldn’t be found.

She knew she was hurting Peter, she knew that she was breaking the sacred covenant of their marriage, but after three years of watching him break his heart and sacrifice just about everything for Neal Caffrey, she couldn’t do it anymore.

It was late, she was tired and she hadn’t checked her phone since the middle of the afternoon.

There were three messages from Peter. Texts that were a variation on a theme: “Have a great time tonight, good luck, I miss you.”

The last one was less than ten minutes old. Instead of replying in kind, she called Peter, wanting to hear his voice. He answered on the first ring.

“Hey, hon.”

“Hey – how did everything go?”

“Brilliantly.” She babbled a bit about the dinner, about the charming attaché and his lovely wife, about the art. All meaningless words. “How was your day?”

“Usual crap, you know – lots of forms to sign, budget meetings. Such is the life of an ASAC.”

She cringed at her husband’s sad, almost depressed tone. She tried to make a joke of it. “No one is letting you play with them? No field ops you can talk your way into?” Peter didn’t answer and El checked to make sure they hadn’t been disconnected. “Hon?”

“Sorry – distracted. Satchmo broke wind and I needed to open the window before I passed out.”

El’s bullshit meter was hitting the red zone, but she didn’t call Peter on it. They chatted for a few minutes about the dog, the weather, everything but what was important. “Look, I’m beat and I’ve got another busy day tomorrow. I think I need to get to bed before I collapse. We can talk more tomorrow.”

Peter made all the right noises, wishing her sweet dreams, telling her he missed her, he loved her.

“Love you, too. I’ll definitely be home next weekend. Wild horses couldn’t keep me away.”

“Can’t wait.”

“Neither can I.” El winced, hating the lie. She ended the call and went to bed, but sleep was a long time coming.

Peter stared at the cell phone in his hand. He’d lied to Elizabeth. It was a lie of omission, but a lie nonetheless.

He felt too raw and wounded to talk about Neal and what happened at the hospital, even with the person he loved most in the world.

It would have been different if El was home. He could crawl into her arms and find the solace he so desperately needed. She’d tell him that it would be all right, she’d echo Benson’s words and maybe from her lips, he could believe that Neal didn’t really mean that it was all his fault, that Neal wasn’t destroyed by his failure.
But El was three hundred miles away, living a different life, wanting different things. Having different dreams.

He was okay with that, happy for her happiness. He really was. People grow and change and became the stronger for the change. It was just that he needed her so damn much and he knew, without a doubt, that if he had told her, she’d be on the next train home.

So what did that make him? A creature of perversity, unwilling to tell his wife he needed her because he wanted her to magically divine that?

He looked at his phone, his thumb hovering to redial the last incoming number. He turned the damn thing off, instead.
Sometime in Late January – Saturday Afternoon

“Check and mate.”

“What, that can’t be right. Move your hands away from the board, Suit.”

“Do you think I cheated?”

“You had to!

“No, I didn’t. I played the same gambit that Fisher used to beat Spassky in Game Six.”

Neal wondered if he was dreaming, but as his thoughts became more coherent, as he listened to the two men, he realized that this definitely wasn’t a dream. Nor a nightmare. Or a drugged out delusion. Because no matter how delusional he was, there was no way his imagination would fabricate an argument between Mozzie and Reese Hughes about a chess match.

He turned his head, and yes, it was Moz and Hughes sitting on the opposite sides of one of those rolling hospital tables, and yes, there was a chess board. Neal blinked and as his eyes focused, he could see the black king tipped over.

Mozzie was gesticulating wildly, his voice rising in aggravation. Hughes sat there, shaking his head, pointing out each move, each mistake that Moz had made.

“Guys, guys – maybe you want to tone it down a bit?” Neal found himself smiling as Moz turned to him, a look of incredible joy on his face. “There are sick people here, you know.”

Moz didn’t move at first, and then he moved so quickly that Neal couldn’t even track it. He was at his bedside, a hand hovering over his and Neal reached up, reveling in the warm, dry clasp of his friend’s hand. Neal blinked, trying hard not to cry. Everything hurt, but nothing bothered him.

Hughes was at the other side of the bed, looking down at him, his expression unusually grave. “How are you feeling, son?”

Son. Something deep inside him warmed at that last word, a feeling that despite what had happened to him, things might turn out all right. Neal swallowed and licked at his dry lips before answering. “I think a little better.” This time, that was the truth.

Moz gently squeezed his hand and looked like he was also about to cry.

He had to ask, “How long? How long was I gone?” The few times he’d woken, it had been dark and he couldn’t see out a window and he hadn’t thought to ask the police when they tried to talk to him. But Moz was wearing a heavy scarf and jacket and Hughes had on a turtleneck.

The last time Neal had seen the sky, it had been the height of summer.

Hughes gave him a sad and sympathetic look before replying, “Six months. It’s the end of January now.”

Neal closed his eyes, trying to take in the passage of time and what that had to mean. “I guess I’m in trouble, right? I remember talking to the cops, but they’re not to ones I need to worry about.”
Hughes nodded.

“I didn’t run.” Neal needed to make sure that Hughes knew that.

“I know.”

Neal was clear-headed enough to sense an undercurrent in that simple reply. “I was angry but I didn’t run. I don’t run. You have to believe me.” He knew he was begging and squeezed Mozzie’s hand. Moz squeezed back but didn’t say anything.

“I do, Neal.”

“But other people don’t.”

“‘The Marshals and the Justice Department are a little … concerned.’ There are … other parties … who have looked at your, well, history, and have been skeptical about your disappearance.”

Neal blinked and tried to decode just what Hughes was telling him. “Other parties?”

“The Secret Service.”

*Of course, of course.* “But not the FBI?” He couldn’t bring himself to ask, *“But not Peter?”*

Hughes smiled slightly and shook his head. “Your friends know you.”

Moz finally chimed in, “Yes – the people who count knew you didn’t run. *I* knew you didn’t run.”

Neal had to smile; Moz spoke as if his opinion was the only one that mattered. And to Moz, that was probably true.

Reese asked, “Do you think you’re up to talking with anyone yet?”

Neal sighed and wished he hadn’t when the deep exhalation pulled at the incisions in his chest. “I guess.” It must have been a testament to his returning sensibilities, because he asked, “Do I need an attorney?” That was a stupid question, of course he did.

Moz harrumphed, but didn’t comment. Hughes gave him an appreciative look. “That can be arranged, but if you want, I can be your advocate.”

“Advocate?”

“Not in an official capacity, but if the questioning becomes problematic, I’ll step in.”

Neal let go of Mozzie’s hand and clenched his fists against the rising tide of panic, ignoring the sharp pain from the IV line. “They’re going to be rough on me, aren’t they?”

“Yes, very. And I’m sorry for that.”

Neal relaxed his hands, forcing them flat against the covers. “I’ve been through worse.” He closed his eyes and tried not to remember just what “worse” actually was.

Neal opened his eyes when Hughes asked Moz to give them a few moments alone. Moz made some grumbling comments but was surprisingly compliant. At least until he gave Hughes a dirty look before closing the door behind him.

Hughes loomed over him, but his expression was unreadable to Neal.
“What’s the matter?”

“What’s the matter?”

“Peter, the division – they couldn’t use Bureau resources to look for you.”

“Peter’s in D.C. – I’m not his responsibility anymore. And I wouldn’t expect …”

Butterflies erupted in Neal’s belly at the mention of Peter’s name. But what Hughes was saying didn’t make sense. “Peter’s in D.C. – I’m not his responsibility anymore. And I wouldn’t expect …”

A memory of something caught him by surprise, but it was too fleeting to decipher.

“Neal, Peter didn’t go to Washington.”

“I don’t understand.”

“He was –” Hughes pursed his lips, “furious about the Justice Department’s refusal to commute your sentence. He told them that he didn’t want a position where he’d need to make decisions about people’s lives based on numbers and statistics.” Hughes laughed. “Basically, he very politely told them to take the job and shove it.”

Neal wasn’t sure what to think, to feel.

“You have to understand that Peter was told that he couldn’t look for you – if he did, it would mean more than his badge. He’d be charged with interfering in a fugitive investigation and he’d face serious criminal charges. He and the entire team would.”

“I see.” He didn’t, not really. There was just too much to take in.

Hughes didn’t seem to notice his confusion, he just kept talking – dropping bombshell after bombshell. “That didn’t stop him – you realize that, right?”

Neal nodded, only because the gesture seemed appropriate.

“Like I said, his hands were tied but he did what he could, unofficially. Peter went back through old cases, talked to a lot of people that were sent to prison because of you. He even went back to the MCC to speak with Rachel Turner before they shipped her off to Colorado.”

That was something that Neal could latch onto. “She wasn’t involved in this.”

“We know that now.” Hughes finally went silent, as if he wanted Neal to pick up the threads of the conversation.

Neal wasn’t sure he could. There was one question he so desperately wanted to ask, but he couldn’t seem to get the words out.

Hughes finally took mercy on him. “Peter can’t talk to you yet. No one from White Collar can.”


“Yes, ‘ah.’ They are too close to you and, well, the Justice Department is concerned about anything that might be shared at this point. I’m sure they’ll be allowed to see you after the initial interviews.”

“But what about you?”
“What about me? I’m retired, a private citizen. I have no influence over anyone.”

Neal wasn’t sure if that was a smirk on Hughes’ lips, but there was definitely a twinkle in the old man’s eyes. “Thank you.”

“I’m glad to help.”

“As a ‘private citizen’, can you answer a few questions?”

“I can try.”

“You said the Secret Service wants to talk to me, so they know about the counterfeits, right?”

“Yes.”

“Thank god.” Neal had to add, “I tried to fuck the plates up – but they had a guy, he was good at finding mistakes and making me redo them. I had to be very subtle. Maybe I was too subtle.” He thought about the message he buried, knowing the odds of it being discovered were almost infinitesimally small.

“Neal, it’s probably best if you save this for the interview.” Hughes’ tone was gentle, but firm.

Yeah, probably. “When are they going to be here?”

“If you’re up to it, within the hour.”

Neal tried to make a joke. “Just enough time for Moz to get me out of here.”

His humor fell flat. “Caffrey – don’t even joke about escaping. There’s a Marshal on the door now.”

“So, if I try to leave, I’ll be shot on sight?”

When Hughes didn’t respond, Neal had to laugh. “Jeez. Seriously?”

That earned him a smile and a gentle pat on the shoulder. “I should go rescue the poor woman. I’m sure your friend has driven her crazy by now.”

Neal caught a glimpse of Moz gesturing at a tall woman in a navy windbreaker as Hughes opened the door. He thought he saw someone else there, too. Tall, broad shoulders, rangy build. But the door closed, blocking his view.

It was probably just wishful thinking.

………………………………………………

“I thought I told you to stay away from Caffrey.”

Peter hadn’t heard Bruce approach; his attention was focused on the door to Neal’s room. It remained firmly closed and guarded by a Marshal with a firearm on display. “I haven’t spoken with him.”

“But you’re here.”

“I’m keeping an eye out for him.”

“Peter…” Bruce’s tone was one of utter exasperation. “I’m only trying to protect you; that’s why I
came up from D.C. You seem intent on sacrificing your career for this man.”

Peter turned, intending to give his boss a stinging rebuke, but was surprised by the compassion in the man’s eyes. He moderated his tone, but didn’t change the message. “I’m not sacrificing anything. I’m doing what’s right.”

Bruce was quiet for a moment and Peter went back to watching the door.

“I guess I owe you an apology.”

“No, you and the Bureau owe Neal Caffrey an apology.” Peter wasn’t prepared to budge on that point.

“This is not the Bureau’s fault.”

“No?” Peter felt his temper rising. “When his tracker was cut, the Bureau washed its hands of Neal, shoved the mess onto the Marshals, who did a half-assed job of looking for him.” He didn’t give Bruce a chance to offer a rebuttal. “I know – to the exact extent – what the Marshals’ ‘manhunt’ consisted of: BOLOs circulated to Interpol, wanted posters at the airports, flags on passports with known aliases. No one ever considered that Neal’s disappearance was involuntary and no one followed any leads.”

“Damn it, Peter – Neal Caffrey has a history of running. You, of all people, should know that. Hell, he cut his anklet and skipped off to Cape Verde when it looked like his commutation wasn’t going to go through. That’s why we wouldn’t release him in the first place.”

Peter clenched his fists. It wouldn’t do him – or Neal – any good to tell Bruce that he’d told Neal to run that day. “You should have trusted my word, Bruce. That should have been good enough. I’ve worked with Neal for three years; I know what he’d do and when he’d do it.”

“There was no evidence of foul play, Peter. Neal Caffrey disappeared without a trace. Where were we supposed to look?”

Peter wasn’t going to have this conversation in such a public space. He stormed off – heading to the small waiting room at the end of the hall. Bruce, thankfully, followed and closed the door behind them.

He counted to ten before he spoke. The agent in him knew that any further display of anger was going to go badly for him. “Where were we supposed to look? We’re the damn FBI, we look everywhere. And don’t you dare say there wasn’t any evidence. There was evidence – we had traffic camera video. A white van was stopped a half-block from Neal’s last known location. The camera even caught Neal in the frame a few seconds before that van disappeared. We even had a license plate. I gave the Marshals that information personally three days after Neal disappeared, and they didn’t bother to follow up. NYPD were kind enough to give me the video of the van that they think Neal was dumped from five days ago. Turns out that it’s same make and model. Same crease along the back fender, too.”

“Peter – ” Bruce held up a hand, trying to calm him.

He wasn’t having any of it. “You want to know something interesting about Manhattan? It’s a fucking island and it’s kind of hard to get off it without crossing a bridge or going through a tunnel. And guess what? Every damn one of them has cameras on them now. We could have tracked that van, maybe found Neal before those animals raped and tortured him.”

Peter swallowed the rest of his rage and went over to the small, dirt-encrusted window. It was
snowing again.

He took a deep breath before continuing. “I don’t know if we would have found Neal, but damn it—we could have tried. You should have trusted me.” Peter didn’t care that he was repeating himself. He didn’t care that he sounded like he was ready to break. That’s what he felt like.

“You blame yourself for what happened to Caffrey?”

“Neal. His name is Neal. And yes, I do.”

“I don’t know what to say, Peter.” Bruce shook his head, appearing regretful for the first time in this whole debacle.

Some of his anger dissipated. “There’s nothing to say at this point, Bruce.”

“I don’t suppose that there’s anything I could do to keep you out of this investigation? To let the Marshals and the Treasury Department handle it from here?”

“No. I’m not letting go of this. I can’t trust anyone to handle this right. Treasury is going to put their resources into the counterfeiting operation – they don’t care what happens to Neal. And the Marshals –” Peter didn’t want to go there.

“Peter, please – you’re too close to this. Do I have to remind you how the Bureau frowns upon such close relationships with CIs? After Connolly and Bulger –”

The rage came back, ten-fold. “Funny, when Neal and I were closing cases right and left, solving the unsolvable, the Bureau had no ‘issue’ with us. And despite the noise the U.S. Attorney made about Cape Verde, we both know why they turned down my request. Neal was too damn valuable an asset to let go of a moment early.”

Bruce scrubbed his face. “I know, and I am sorry.”

Peter still couldn’t let it go. “Don’t you wonder at why they did what they did to Neal? Why they tortured him?” He didn’t wait for Bruce to answer. “Because he wouldn’t give them what they wanted. He was doing the right thing and just about paid for it with his life. He may have paid for it with his sanity.”

He walked out, leaving Bruce standing there. The small room felt too confining for his anger. He couldn’t breathe in the sterile blandness.
Sometime in Late January – Saturday Afternoon

In nearly two decades of police work and hundreds, if not thousands, of witness and victim interviews, she’d never participated in one where so many different law enforcement groups wanted a piece of the action. First there were the Treasury agents, then the U.S. Marshals and last, but not least, was the FBI and Peter Burke, who looked like rage personified as he paced the hall.

Apparently he wasn’t permitted to take part in any of the interviews, not allowed into the room, even if he promised to keep his mouth shut. The Marshals Service, which shouldn’t have had a stake in the game now that the “fugitive” was recovered, acted like they were ready to escort Neal Caffrey to the gas chamber without the benefit of a trial. The guys from the Treasury Department were clearly planning on playing alpha dog and setting the agenda, not that she was going to let them.

The victim, thankfully, was looking a hell of a lot better than he had last night. Caffrey still had that bruised and haunted look that she was all too familiar with, but he was coherent and ready to answer a few questions.

There were two men already in Neal’s hospital room when she and the Feds entered: a short bald man who seemed like he wanted to take all of them one with one hand tied behind his back. The other man, tall and grizzled, with sharp blue eyes and a nose that would put a Roman senator to shame, whispered something in his ear. The little one glared at him, looked at Caffrey, who nodded, and then left. Both Caffrey and the old man seemed to sigh with relief.

Just after the bald man left, two Treasury agents came in. To her surprise, one of them knew the old man. “Reese Hughes, what the hell are you doing here?”

Olivia had to wonder at just who this guy was. She thought he might be Neal’s attorney, but now she wasn’t all that sure.

He glared at everyone, including her. “I’m here to make sure that no one oversteps themselves.”

“Seriously? You’re watching out for Caffrey?”

Hughes nodded and gave the Feds a stare that promised retribution if they did ‘overstep themselves’.

Olivia introduced herself, took everyone’s name for the record and asked Neal if he was ready to begin.

“Let’s get this over with.” He looked up at the old man, who nodded.

The senior Treasury agent, Carlyle, jumped in and began interrogating Caffrey like he was a suspect, but before Neal could respond, Hughes cut him off.

“Rand, let me remind you again that Mr. Caffrey is the victim here, and your participation in this interview is at the sufferance of the NYPD. And at mine.”

She normally wouldn’t defer to anyone, but this guy, Hughes, clearly was the one with the biggest balls in the room. Olivia gave him a grateful smile and turned her attention back to Neal, “I know this is difficult, but can you start at the beginning, when you were abducted?”

“I guess.” Neal took a sip of water, and he was shaking so badly he needed two hands to hold the
cup. “It was a Saturday afternoon. I had just talked with Peter – he told me that the Justice Department had refused his request for a commutation of my sentence. I was angry and I was thinking about just leaving.”

“Thinking?” That was from one of the Marshals.

“Thinking, not doing.” Caffrey’s tone was pure steel. “Anyway, there was a guy sitting on a bench. I thought I’d seen him before – like he’d been following me for a couple of days. I was going to walk away, but I didn’t – I went over to him and asked him who he was. He said –” Neal shook his head and gave a bitter laugh, “I’m the last person alive who knows where you are’. I didn’t have a chance to run – a van or a truck or something pulled up and a bunch of guys grabbed me and shoved me in the back. They taped my mouth and broke the tracker off my anklet. They gave me a shot and I woke up chained to a wall.”

Neal paused and looked at her. “I don’t know if I can do this.”

Olivia told Neal to take his time. The Feds’ heaving sighs of annoyance were stifled by a look from the old man. Whoever he was, he had a lot of juice.

Neal seemed to get a handle on his emotions and continued. “I don’t remember much from the first few days. No one talked to me, they just came in and beat the crap out of me every once and a while. I don’t know how long that went on – days, weeks? The room didn’t have a window and I had no sense of time. I’m sorry – I’m not being very useful.”

Olivia offered some encouragement. “No – this is fine. Do you remember what the man who you first talked to – the one who’d been following you – looked like?”

“Cowboy boots. He wore hand-tooled cowboy boots.” Neal grimaced. “Strange thing to remember, but you don’t see men wearing cowboy boots in the summer in New York City. I guess it’s a good way of keeping people from concentrating on your face.”

Olivia remembered what Peter Burke had told her – how Neal’s intelligence impressed him. She was impressed. “So, you can’t describe his face?”

“No, I can.” Neal closed his eyes, summoning the memory. “Caucasian, Wavy hair, red-brown, light blue eyes, mid to late thirties, sparse facial hair, about my height but bulkier. Couldn’t tell if he had any tattoos, didn’t see any scars. Despite the cowboy boots, he had no discernible accent.”

“Would you be able to work with a sketch artist?”

He shrugged. “Probably, but he wasn’t one of the guys who kept working me over.”

“Can you describe them?”

Neal shook his head. “No. They wore ski masks when they beat me. When they raped me, I was face down.” That last sentence came out in a rush and Caffrey dropped his eyes, unable to look at anyone.

Hughes whispered something in Neal’s ear and Neal nodded.

“Like I said, I couldn’t tell you how much time passed. I was kept chained like an animal, but they took care not to injure me too much. I can remember someone telling them to be careful with my hands and not to hit my head. I can only figure that they were trying to break me down. Like a prisoner of war.” Caffrey started to shake again. “Exactly like that. They told me that all I had to do was cooperate and the pain would stop.”
The Feds kept their mouths shut as Caffrey continued to detail the misery he suffered.

“They’d come into the cell and hurt me – sometimes whips, sometimes stun guns, sometimes – ”
Caffrey paused and shook his head, “other things. They’d finish and tell me that they’d stop once I cooperated, but they’d never tell me what they wanted from me. I always got the feeling that they wanted to cause the maximum amount of pain with the minimum physical damage. Until one day when they took me into a different room and said that everything would be all right if I just did this very simple thing.” Neal’s lips twisted in mockery. They wanted me to make the engraving plates for the front and back of a U.S. hundred dollar bill.”

Of course, the Treasury agents sat up and took notice, but at least they deferred to her and waited for permission to question Neal. She looked to the old man, who gave them all a sharp nod. Olivia knew that he’d cut them all off if the questions crossed the line.

Carlisle’s question was very simple. “And did you? Did you make the plates?”

Neal nodded, but was clearly ashamed of his cooperation. “Yes – I made the obverse and reverse. Three of each. Like they’d asked.”

“Why three?”

“I don’t know – I don’t know.” Neal was getting shaky and Olivia thought about shutting the interview down.

But he seemed to recover and continued. “They had a guy – he’d check my work every hour or so. He was looking for errors.”

“Can you describe him? Did he talk to you?”

“Old – older than,” Neal looked up at the man who was guarding him. “Reese, here.”

Reese frowned and just said, “Thanks.”

Carlisle seemed especially interested in this, “Was he a Westerner? Asian?”

“European, Slavic definitely but I don’t know if he was Russian or Ukrainian or from one of the Baltics. Tall, like Reese, a full head of silver-gray hair, light-colored eyes, no beard, no scars, smooth skin. He spoke English to me, accented, but not heavily. I think he was educated in the West, maybe England? Something about his word usage was very formal, his grammar was perfect – maybe a British public school education?”

“Do you think he was the one calling the shots?”

“I don’t know. He knew what he was doing; he knew what to look for.” Neal frowned and seemed to get caught up in a memory. “He knew exactly how many lines there were in Franklin’s forehead. I’d tried to add an extra one, but he spotted it immediately.”

“What happened?” Olivia had to ask.

Neal gave her a bitter look. “After I stopped bleeding, I had to redo the plate.” He took a deep breath and continued. “I did manage to put something in there. A message – but you’d need to look at bills from all three plates to see it.”

Olivia found the expressions on the Treasury agents very interesting. It seemed to her that they knew about this. The two Marshals in the room just looked at the floor. She asked, “What was the
message?"

Neal blinked rapidly, but he couldn’t stop the tears, “*adiuvare me* – help me.” He wiped his face and repeated, “*adiuvare me petrus*. ‘help me peter’.”

No one said anything.

Caffrey regained control of his emotions and continued, “I used very tiny nicks– breaking down the letters across each of the plates. I knew it was a long shot, but I’d hoped. I’d hoped…”

Neal’s voice trailed off and Olivia could see that he was done. She turned off the recorder and stood up. “Neal – thank you. I’ll arrange for a sketch artist to come by and if we have more questions, we’ll arrange another session through Reese.”

The old gentleman nodded and ushered everyone out of the room. She wasn’t surprised to see Agent Burke waiting there. He was flanked by a man and a woman, both younger, both African-American, both sporting gold shields on their belts. An older man in a dark overcoat hovered behind them. She guessed that this was the FBI contingent. Hughes went over to them, and it was clear that he was filling them in on the interview – at least Burke and the two agents. The older man was very obviously cut out of that circle.

He caught her eye and came over.

His introduction was brusque but not overtly hostile. “Bruce McKinsey, Section Chief – and Peter Burke’s boss. You’re Sergeant Benson, right – the cop working Caffrey’s assault case? Can you tell me what’s going on?”

“I’m not sure I should. This is an on-going NYPD investigation.”

McKinsey nodded. “Caffrey’s contract with the Bureau comes under my jurisdiction; ultimately I’m responsible for him.

Olivia wasn’t so certain about that, but she was mindful of Burke’s request to help the Feds understand that Neil was a victim, not a perp. “It wasn’t pretty. Caffrey was grabbed off the street and tortured into compliance.”

“You believe him?”

“Absolutely.”

He still seemed skeptical. “Really? You don’t think he set this up?”

“No, not in the least. While Agent Burke has filled me in on Caffrey’s history, I’ve been with Special Victims for over fifteen years, and I know when someone’s running a con on me. And even if I had my doubts, seeing pictures of scars from the Taser burns on the man’s testicles would erase them.”

The man actually winced. “Ah – yeah. Will he be okay?”

“I’m not a doctor, Agent McKinsey.”

“No – but you’re a veteran cop and like you’ve said, you’ve seen this before.”

Olivia had the feeling she was swimming into deep, shark-filled waters. “Honestly, that’s not for me to say. You’ll have to get clearance and talk to his doctors if you want a medical opinion.”

McKinsey knew just what she was doing and grimaced. “Very well.” He looked back over his
shoulder at Burke and the other agents. “Can I ask you another question?”

The man reminded her of everything she didn’t like about the FBI. “You can ask, I won’t promise to answer, though.”

“Fair enough. What’s your take on Peter Burke?”

Olivia raised an eyebrow at that. “As an agent?”

“Yes.”

“Well, I couldn’t say. It’s not like I’ve really worked with him.”

The man gave her an annoyed look. “Come on – you had to have formed an impression.”

“He seems smart, dedicated and thorough.”

“Do you think he’s got a blind spot when it comes to Caffrey?”

Olivia could see McKinsey’s agenda and she lied through her teeth. “No. When I first met Agent Burke, and he told me about Neal Caffrey, he was very upfront about him, he said that Neal was a criminal. He believed that he was trying to go straight, but I never got the impression that he romanticized who Neal was and what he’d done.”

She got the feeling that McKinsey didn’t believe her, but he didn’t belabor the point. “Well, thank you.” He sighed and again looked over at Burke, who was talking with Neal’s friend, Reese. “You’ve been a big help.”

He walked away and she watched his interactions with Agent Burke and the old man. He gave him a surprising amount of deference that made her wonder again just who he was. They talked for a few moments, and Olivia wished she could hear their conversation. Burke made a slashing motion with his hand and Reese seemed to be trying to calm him down. McKinsey’s body language was stiff, tension in every line of his posture – which perfectly mirrored Burke’s.

She was tempted to get closer, to listen in, but McKinsey left and Reese drew Peter over to Neal’s room. Except that the man was having nothing of it and broke away, disappearing into a elevator.
Chapter 10

Sometime in Late January – Sunday Evening

Elizabeth was sick. Sick and sad and hurt beyond measure, beyond reason.

Since she’d talked to Peter late Friday night, she couldn’t shake the feeling that something was the matter. That feeling was reinforced last night, when it seemed as if he couldn’t wait to get off the phone. She’d even asked him if anything was wrong and he was quick to deflect, offer excuses: he was tired, the endless snow was wearing him down, he was drowning in paperwork. Her heart had warmed a bit as his voice softened when he told her he missed her and couldn’t wait to see her.

But still…

Every Sunday, rain or shine, New York or D.C., she talked to Mozzie. He’d leave a text message with a cellphone number for her to call, which often lead to a voice mail box with further instructions. It was a game and she didn’t mind indulging his paranoia. They’d talk and she’d get the “real news” – the important stuff. How Theo Berrigan was a budding genius, whether the new mayor of New York was a real socialist or just pretending, and how the world really needed less cows. She enjoyed his odd and often one-sided conversations; they gave her a connection back to the life she’d left behind.

It was the same as with Peter. They were careful not to talk about Neal.

This morning, though, was completely different. Moz hadn’t bothered with his usual Byzantine schemes. At noon, her cell phone rang and she checked the caller ID – it was a number with a 907 area code and while El couldn’t think of a single person in Alaska who’d be calling her, she answered.

“Mrs. Suit! Have you been to the hospital yet?”

“Moz?” Her stomach filled with a flock of frantically beating butterflies. “Hospital? Peter?” Why hadn’t anyone called her?

“Peter? Huh? No, he’s fine. It’s Neal. He’s been found.”

She opened her mouth but couldn’t form any words.

“Elizabeth?” Mozzie’s tone changed to worried curiosity. “Didn’t you know?”

“No, I didn’t.” She managed to get those three simple words out. “When?”

Mozzie’s silence was telling. “Yeah – well. Last week, early Friday night before the snow hit. From what I heard, a local hero turned up at the FBI offices just before closing time, looking for one of the Demi-Suits. Found your husband instead. Neal was it pretty bad shape, but he’s going to be all right.”

Friday? But I talked to Peter on Friday and he didn’t tell me.. She swallowed against the hard lump in her throat. “What – what happened?”

Moz didn’t answer right away. “Look – if the Suit didn’t tell you, maybe you weren’t supposed to know. It’s been very hush-hush.”
“Mozzie, please,” El begged.

“Look, I – I’ve got to go. Talk to you next Sunday!” Mozzie hung up and when El redialed, all she got was the recording that that number was not in service.

Elizabeth made another phone call, but it wasn’t to her husband. She called her boss and told her she needed to take a few days. A family emergency, she explained. The woman made all sorts of understanding noises and told El not to worry – she’d done a brilliant job with the two events this past weekend and she should go back to New York and take care of her husband.

Yes, she was going to take care of her husband all right.

For the entire train ride into New York, she thought about what she was going to say to Peter. When the train pulled out of Union Station, she was furious and ready to flay him. How dare he not tell her? Ninety minutes later, when it arrived in Philadelphia, her fury was tempered with worry. Why wouldn’t he tell her something so vital, so important? Two hours after that, as she got out in Penn Station, Elizabeth didn’t know what she felt. Other than sick and sad: for Neal, because something terrible had happened to him, but almost as much for herself.

She wondered if this was payback for all the years of smug self-knowledge that amongst all her friends, she had the best marriage, the most loyal and perfect of husbands. That Peter shared everything with her, they had no secrets from each other.

Even after all those miles, it still seemed incomprehensible that Peter didn’t tell her that Neal had been found. It felt like a betrayal of everything they were to each other, partners and friends – not just spouses. The subway trip from midtown to Brooklyn was never going to be long enough to provide answers.

A little after four, just as the last of the winter daylight faded, she let herself into the house. Satchmo greeted her with almost painful exuberance. The place smelled stale, as if no one had been home – or as if no one was spending any time here. The mail was on the table by the door, but it hadn’t been sorted. Three days’ worth of newspapers was piled next to it, all still wrapped in their blue plastic bags. At least Peter had come home a few times over the last few days.

Instead of just sitting and waiting for Peter, Elizabeth set about restoring some sense of order to the place. She put the dishes away, watered the plants, fed the dog. But no matter how much she fussed and puttered around, this place didn’t feel like the home she’d loved so much.

El kicked off her shoes and tried to relax. Satchmo whined at her and she patted the couch in invitation. The dog didn’t hesitate and joined her, resting his head in her lap. She sat there, stroking his fur and tried to make sense of everything.

How her wonderful life was just falling apart.

She must have dozed, because the sound of a key in the lock startled her. Satch jumped off the couch and went to the door, giving his customary bark. It all felt absurdly normal, as if Peter was coming home after a long day at work. El stood and tried to organize her thoughts, tried to curb the need to pounce on Peter, to accuse him of … what?

“El?”

He was standing there, looking nothing like her husband. He seemed like a shadow, a shell of the man she left behind just a few short weeks ago. Her heart ached. Then he smiled at her as if nothing was wrong, and when he moved in to kiss her, she stepped back.
“Hon?’

She wanted to say, *Don’t you ‘hon’ me* but instead she glared at him, feeling all that anger again. “I spoke to Mozzie this afternoon.”

Peter met her fury head on, his words equally harsh and direct. “He told you.”

“Yes. You found Neal on Friday evening, hours before we’d talked.” She spat those last words out in a damning indictment.

“I didn’t find him.” Peter remained calm.

“Don’t split hairs – he was found, you found him – it doesn’t make a difference. I don’t get why you didn’t feel it was necessary to tell me.” She was shouting at him, something she could never remember doing.

“I did not find him, Elizabeth.”

Her mouth snapped shut. He called her ‘Elizabeth’. Whatever she was going to say was forgotten. Peter wasn’t calm; he was barely controlled. For the first time ever, she was afraid of him. “Peter?”

“I didn’t find him. Don’t you get it? I didn’t find him.” He didn’t shout, but his words were like a scream.

She finally comprehended what he was trying to make her understand. In a reversal of their behavior just a few moments ago, she went to her husband and tried to offer some comfort. But Peter stepped back and turned from her, stalking over to the dining room table, resting against it in a posture of utter defeat.

“Tell me, hon.” She approached him cautiously, as if her husband was a wild animal. She rested her hand on his back, he shivered and flinched but didn’t move away.

His voice was slow, his tone almost mechanical. “A cop came to the office on Friday night. She was looking for Clinton, she said that a victim in one of her cases had told her to find him. She said that the victim’s name was Danny Brooks, and he’d been kidnapped and — and tortured and only been found when he’d been dumped from the back of a van, barely alive.”

Peter’s recitation flayed her.

She’d been so certain that Neal had cut his anklet and run, that Peter’s insistence that Neal had met with foul play was the product of wishful thinking, the need to believe that Neal was a slightly skewed version of himself. That Neal could have been another Peter Burke if he just hadn’t felt the need to be a criminal.

El had never been able to shake the feeling that her husband had been heading for another round of painful disappointment, more misplaced faith in Neal’s promises, and it devastated her to be proven wrong like this. But she focused on the moment because she was unable to find a way to fix the greater problem between them. “How is he?”

“Alive.” Peter sat down, moving like an old man. “He’s alive and awake and he’s been able to tell people what happened to him.”

“People? Not you?”

Peter shook his head. “No, not me. He — he had to talk to the NYPD first. He’s the victim in a
serious criminal assault and kidnapping. And of course, the Justice Department wants their pound of flesh from him.”

Despite her anger, her confusion, El knew that there was too much that Peter wasn’t saying. “You can’t mean that they want to hold Neal to the balance of his sentence?”

“It’s under discussion.”

El flinched at the disgust in Peter’s voice. She sat down next to her husband, again at a loss for words. ‘I’m sorry’ seemed so inadequate.

Elizabeth was sitting close enough to him that he could smell her perfume and yet she felt as far away as if she was still in D.C. “Peter, why didn’t you tell me?”

There was so much hurt in her question, so much pain. But Peter wasn’t ready for this confrontation, and it was possible that he never would be. He loved his wife more than words could express, he hated the distance between them, but he couldn’t stop the endless tide of resentment.

He understood why she furious that he hadn’t told her about Neal. Hurt and betrayed, too. But how could he tell her that he felt the same things, too? That they’d been steady undercurrents of his days and nights for the last six months, undermining the very foundation of his soul?

“Peter?”

He was afraid to answer her; afraid that if he started talking, he’d end up shouting and giving vent to his barely suppressed rage. El didn’t deserve that.

But an insidious voice, the one that fed off of loneliness and anguish and too many nights spent staring up at the ceiling, whispered, Or maybe she did?

Peter gritted his teeth and tried to find some level of calm. “I couldn’t tell you.”

“Oh.” El blinked. “It was classified?”

Peter wanted to take refuge in that lie, but that was denied to him. If Elizabeth was anything, she was smart.

“Wait, if it was classified, then how did Mozzie know?”

Of course she figured it out. “I couldn’t tell you because –” Peter wiped his mouth, trying to buy time, to find a way to explain that might not destroy the best thing in his life. “Because I –” He cut himself off again. “Hon, do we really have to do this?”

She wasn’t giving him any quarter. “Why, Peter? Why won’t you tell me? Why didn’t you tell me?”

“All, please. Not now.”

“I don’t understand, Peter. We share everything; I’ve been with you through all the hell you’ve gone through with Neal, why couldn’t you tell me that he’d been found?”

Something broke and the words came, as unstoppable as a tsunami. “Because I needed you and you weren’t here. You were never here. You –”

All of the color leeched from El’s face.
He kept talking and the agony of the last six months flooded out of him. “You were building your own life, you were happy – and I’ve been happy for you. But it was so clear that you didn’t want to know how much I was hurting, how worried I was, how hemmed in and constrained and locked into pretending that nothing was wrong when somewhere out there, Neal was being raped and tortured and –” He finally stopped, realizing that he was shouting at El, that she’d jumped up and retreated across the room, tears streaming down her face. Satchmo whimpered, looking from him to Elizabeth, not knowing who he should comfort.

Peter looked at his hands, surprised to see them fisted. He retreated, too, putting as much distance between himself and Elizabeth as he could. He knew he should apologize, he should take back those horrible, hurtful words, but he couldn’t make them unsaid, as much as he wanted to.
Chapter 11

Sometime in Late January – Monday, Late Afternoon

Neal was exhausted. He’d been up and walking – to the end of the hall and back, not once, not twice, but three times, the Marshal on duty trailing him and the aide as if he was going to make a break for it with a catheter, three IV bags and wearing nothing more than a hospital gown and a pair of no-skid socks. He’d had a session with the respiratory therapist, who was concerned about the lack of the progress he was making. It was still too hard to breathe and everything hurt too damned much. The doctors poked and prodded at him, and while they still wouldn’t meet his eyes, Neal decided it was because they were socially inept with no bedside manners, and not because he was a damn victim.

But at least Moz had come by with June, who brought a container of homemade chicken soup and matzoh balls. The broth was rich and salty and tasted like the dreams of his childhood. He finished every last drop of the small cup he was allowed to have, giving a satisfied sigh.

June didn’t stay long, too aware of how easily he tired. But she was quick to assure him that her home was still his home, and always would be, no matter what. They hadn’t talked about what had happened to him and he wasn’t sure how much Moz had shared, but of all the people in his life, she was the last person he wanted to be burdened with the details of his ordeal.

After June left, his friend produced a small silver pastry box.

“Mozzie, you didn’t?” Emotions were too close to the surface these days and he felt himself starting to tear up.

“Can the waterworks, Caffrey – they’re just cronuts. Nothing to cry over.”

“How long did you wait on line?”

Mozzie shrugged, then grinned at him. “I might have waited. I might not have waited. Does it really matter?”

“I guess not.” In truth, he was full from the soup and while there was the possibility that someone might filch the pastries, he’d save them for later.

Mozzie settled himself into the recliner next to the bed and took out a book. Neal let the wave of exhaustion wash over him and he closed his eyes, easily falling into a dreamless sleep.

The sound of softly arguing voices woke him, but Neal didn’t open his eyes. The dichotomy between the sense of safety and the level of strain he could hear made him cautious. He played possum for a few moments, until he recognized the voices, even though he couldn’t make out the words. It was Moz and Elizabeth.

Finally, he spoke, “El?”

She turned and smiled at him, and even in his half-awake state, Neal could tell that something was wrong.

“Hey there.” She had her hands shoved in her coat pockets and made no move to come any closer.

He pressed a button and the bed inclined, but his pillow slipped to the floor. As he made a move to
reach for it, his stitches pulled and he hissed in pain. Both El and Moz stepped in to help. Neal pretended not to notice the silent communication between them. Moz got him settled and comfortable, gave El another speaking look and left, muttering something about needing to make sure the Marshal at the door hadn’t fallen asleep.

He smiled, trying to put Elizabeth at ease, but he failed. Her misery became more and more evident with every passing second.

“I’m going to be fine, Elizabeth.” He held out a hand to her. She didn’t take it and stood there, next to his bed, sorrow and strain clouding her eyes.

“Neal – ” The way she said his name made him want to cry.

“Elizabeth, please don’t cry. I’ll be all right.”

She shook her head. “I’m so sorry, Neal. So sorry.”

He reached out again, this time grabbing her wrist. She turned her hand and their palms met.

“You’ve got nothing to be sorry about.”

“No, I do.” She tried to withdraw her hand, but Neal wouldn’t let go. “Please, Neal.”

He smiled again, the masks falling into place. “Talk to me, tell me what’s going on.”

“I thought you ran.”

Her words shouldn’t have hurt, but they did. Neal opened his mouth to say something, anything, but he couldn’t fill the dead air between them. He kept his grip on her hand, though. Elizabeth, her warmth, her friendship, her compassion, had been a dream during those nightmare months and he wasn’t ready to let her go, not just yet.

“I thought you ran and I was glad. You deserved your freedom and I thought you’d taken the chance.”

Neal could understand that, maybe. It still hurt, but seeing Elizabeth’s pain hurt worse. “It’s okay, it’s not like I hadn’t run before, when the going got rough.”

She laughed, but the sound was bitter and unpleasant. “After everything, you’re the one comforting me? That’s not right.”

“Elizabeth – what happened, happened. It wasn’t your fault. It wasn’t anyone’s fault.” He heard the words he was saying, and an echo of his voice shouting those words, other words.

“I know – it’s easy to say but it’s harder to believe.”

Her reply snapped him back to the here and now. He couldn’t understand why she was torturing herself like this and he had the feeling that no matter what he said, it would only make things worse. Wanting to keep Elizabeth from fleeing, Neal changed the subject. “You must have been disappointed to have to turn down the job at the National Gallery.”

She dropped her head, her expression even more miserable, if possible. “I didn’t turn it down. I’ve been in D.C. Didn’t anyone tell you?”

Neal had a hard time wrapping his brain around the idea of Peter and Elizabeth not being together, and just blurted out, “You left Peter?”
She bit her lip and didn’t look at him. This time, when she tried to pull her hand from his, he let go. “It’s not like I’ve left him. I come back to New York when I can. Peter comes down to D.C. when he can. We’re very – ” She paused, searching for an adjective, “modern. It’s really not that much different from when Peter and I were starting out and he was on the road, working cases.”

Neal nodded in agreement, even though really he didn’t agree. There was a big difference between being on the road and setting up a household in another city.

“So you like working there?” Neal found that he really didn’t care about her answer, he was too consumed with the idea that Peter had been on his own for the last six months.

Elizabeth talked for a bit, telling him how she was fusing her love of art with her skills as an event planner. They chatted about their favorite exhibits and she shared some tidbits about an upcoming showing of French Impressionists. He made a bad joke about stopping by and picking up a few “souvenirs” which earned him a forced chuckle.

The conversation died away and Neal took a deep breath to ask the question that had been on his mind for days now. “Do you know why Peter hasn’t been here? I haven’t seen him at all. Hughes has told me that I couldn’t see anyone from White Collar until after the Treasury agents interviewed me, but that happened on Saturday. Clinton and Diana have been in, I even spoke to Peter’s boss, but Peter hasn’t visited. I asked Moz, but he couldn’t tell me anything, do you know why?” He hated the querulous, needy quality of his voice, but he didn’t have the emotional wherewithal to pretend that Peter’s absence didn’t hurt.

Elizabeth shook her head; the expression on her face was both surprised and concerned. “I don’t know. I can’t imagine why he hasn’t been in. He was so desperately worried about you since you – ” She swallowed hard, “disappeared. It consumed him. I had no idea that he hadn’t seen you.” She didn’t meet his eyes and kept looking at the door; as if she was hoping that someone would come in and interrupt them.

Once upon a time, Elizabeth might have run her fingers through his curls, comforted him and called him sweetie. Now it seemed like she couldn’t wait to escape this room.

Neal took pity on her. “You probably need to get back to D.C. Moz said something about another big snowstorm tonight, and it would be awful to get stuck on the train.”

El knew exactly what he was doing and gave him a grateful smile. “Yeah, that would be a good idea.” The polite fictions continued, “I hate leaving you, though.”

As limited as his physical and emotional resources were, Neal found it easier to fall back on his own white lies. “I’ll be fine. Moz is here, and Reese will be coming by tonight. The doctors are pleased with my progress and they even made some noises about letting me out of here. Go, get yourself back to D.C. I’ll be fine.” Neal repeated, almost convinced of the truth.

El smiled, but it sort of crumpled when she closed the distance between them. She offered another needless apology, but finally bent over and kissed his cheek, resting there for a second, a millennium, before rushing out of the room.

Neal watched the space between the door and the wall, trying to get a glimpse of the outside world, but his view was blocked by the blue-jacketed back of the Marshal standing guard.

He wished …

He didn’t really know what he wished for anymore. Once upon a time, in another life, freedom was
all he wanted and it was a simple dream. No tracker, no handler, no endless longing for a different skyline, a different sunset. That dream ended with a black pillowcase dropped over his head and a six month trip through the inner circles of Hell.

Actually, there was something he wanted, desperately. He wanted Peter, to talk to him, to tell him everything that happened, to make him understand that he hadn’t run. He couldn’t really talk to Moz or June or Reese. And telling the doctors and the police offered no surcease. He needed Peter and he couldn’t understand why Peter wasn’t here.

Neal tried to relax, telling himself that even though Peter was in New York, not D.C., he was busy and couldn’t just drop everything to be at his side. Hughes had said that no one from White Collar was supposed to see him until the Feds had interviewed him, so maybe that was it.

But that didn’t explain why Diana and Clinton came in right after the interview was over. If they could see him, why couldn’t Peter? Maybe Peter was in trouble? Maybe his disappearance had caused more problems that anyone would let on.

His thoughts went around and around, spiraling ever darker.

“Neal? You okay?”

Neal blinked and recoiled, he hadn’t heard anyone come into the room. It was the cop, Benson.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to startle you. I was in the hospital and thought I’d stop by, see how you were doing.”

He shrugged. “Okay – I guess. The doctors are pleased with my progress.”

She pulled up a chair and sat down, like she was settling in for a cozy conversation. “Did they tell you when you’ll be able get out of here?”

“Yeah, maybe Thursday or Friday. They’re concerned about infection, about my breathing, but if I continue to improve, they’ll spring me.”

“Do you have a place to go?”

“Yeah – my apartment’s still there.” He tried not to think about the awful possibility that he’d be taken back to prison or put into some secure facility. Hughes hadn’t said anything about it, but there was still a Marshal watching, and Neal was pretty sure it wasn’t for his protection.

“Do you have someone to look after you?”

Neal raised an eyebrow at the cop’s almost relentless concern. “Yes, I do. I do have friends.” He tried not to think about Peter. Tried and failed.

“Yes, you do. Good ones. You’re lucky.”

“I know.”

Benson had an odd and almost regretful expression on her face. She looked like there was something she wanted to tell him. Instead, her lips twisted into a smile and she abruptly stood up. “We’ll be in touch.”

Neal had to ask, “Do you think you’ll catch the people who did this?”

“We’re pursuing a number of leads.”
“In other words, you don’t have a clue, do you?”

“No, in other words, it’s an active investigation, and you should know I can’t discuss the details – not even with you.”

“Yeah, I get that.” And even though he knew his anger was unreasonable, he couldn’t keep the bitterness out of his voice.

Benson paused, again like she wanted to tell him something.

“What?”

“Nothing.” She gave him another rueful smile and left.

Neal wished he could do the same.
Sometime in Late January – Monday, Late Afternoon

The train ride back to D.C. wasn’t long enough. Hell, a cruise around the world in a sailboat wouldn’t be long enough to resolve the disaster that was now her marriage. And although she should be consumed by plans to fix it, Elizabeth couldn’t stop thinking about Neal and the terrible pain he was in.

“Do you know why Peter hasn’t been here? I haven’t seen him at all.

She’d thought that her husband would have been glued to Neal’s side. Yes, Peter told her that he was barred from seeing Neal until after he’d been interviewed by the police and the Justice Department, but Neal had said that those interviews were over. He told her that Diana and Clinton had been in to see him. But Peter hadn’t.

She couldn’t understand that, she didn’t know what it meant. But given Peter’s own pain, his rage, it couldn’t be good.

She pulled out her phone and deliberately not overthinking things, she called him. His cell phone went right to voice mail.

She didn’t leave a message.

Olivia hated leaving Caffrey hanging like that. She’d specifically gone to see him to talk with him about Peter Burke, to tell him how the man had put his career on the line for him. Cragen would tell her it wasn’t her job and she was getting too emotionally invested, Elliot would say she was crazy to get between a Fed and a criminal, even if that criminal was a victim. But Elliot was gone from her life as if he’d never existed. Maybe that was why she felt so bad for Peter Burke. She knew too well what it was like to lose a partner and a friend.

And yet, when push came to shove, she’d said nothing to Neal. Maybe it was the utter anguish on his face when she’d walked in, maybe it was a shred of common sense, but she kept her mouth shut on the subject of Peter Burke.

This morning was an enlightening experience.

Burke had asked her to come over to the FBI offices – he needed her as backup when he spoke with the Justice Department. They were going to debate the disposition of Neal Caffrey, alleged fugitive.

After working in the controlled chaos of a busy police station for so long, the hush of the FBI offices was almost a shock. Every desk was filled, agents were as busy as her own cops, phones rang, but it was a completely different atmosphere. She’d never mistake any of the men and women here as mere paper pushers, but there was something a little too civilized for her tastes.

Waiting for the guard to clear her through, she looked around and recognized the two agents who had been with Burke on Sunday. They both approached.

“Peter told us to expect you. He’s not in the office, but he’ll be here soon.” The female agent, who introduced herself as Diana Berrigan, reminded her a little of herself in her younger days. “Thank you for – well – this. For everything. For taking care of Neal.”
Olivia shrugged off the woman’s gratitude. “You know Neal Caffrey well?”

“I was there, at the very beginning.” She pointed a thumb at the other agent. “So was Jones.”

That gave her a start. “Jones? Are you Clinton Jones?”

“Yeah, how did you know my name?”

“When I first spoke with Neal, he told me to ask for you. He said to tell you that ‘Danny Brooks hasn’t been living the dream.’ I told Agent Burke when I came here on Friday evening, but I don’t know if he passed that on to you.”

Agent Jones stuck his hands in his pockets and dropped his head, looking devastated. “I guess Caffrey must have asked for me because he didn’t know that Peter hadn’t gone to D.C.”

“Can I ask what he meant by ‘not living the dream’? It seems like a very specific message.”

“Ah, yeah. Neal and I had been drinking together one night a few years ago. My ex had come into town and things were complicated. Neal stopped by with a bottle of single malt and a friendly shoulder. We talked about what we wanted out of our lives. Neal said he wanted to have something meaningful to do, to never have to worry about money. I teased him – said that he was already living the dream, with a damned tracking anklet.”

Jones let out a deep, almost mournful sigh. “I guess that was his way of telling me that he hadn’t run.”

Olivia had to ask, “Did you think he had?”

“It crossed my mind. He’d run before, but this time running wouldn’t have made any sense, not with so little of his sentence left. Things had been a little strange with him and Peter for a while, but everything had settled down. Before Neal had asked him to get the rest of his sentence commuted, Peter had told me that I’d probably step in as his handler for the last year of his sentence. Was kind of looking forward to it, too. It might have made my career. Or broken it to pieces.”

Given what she’d already seen, it didn’t surprise Olivia that Neal had become close enough to an FBI agent to go to his home and drink with him. She had a dozen other questions, at least, but Peter Burke came in, looking like hell on wheels. He saw her and stopped short.

“Olivia, thanks – appreciate you coming here.” He sighed and looked at Berrigan and Jones. “I don’t think I can bring you into this. It might be – no, it will be – a blood bath, and you’re both better off staying out of it.”

Berrigan wasn’t put off. “We’ve been through worse, boss. Remember the mess with the Russian Heritage Museum?”

Peter gave the agent a wry smile. “Oh, I think cleaning up after Neal is going to be a cakewalk compared to cleaning up after me when this is all said and done.”

Of course Olivia had no idea what had gone on at the Russian Heritage Museum, but the worried look that Berrigan gave Peter at his quip was disconcerting.

He didn’t give her time to ask questions. “Come on – I’ve got to brief you.” He bounded up the stairs to his office, not even checking to see if she followed. Jones shook his head, clearly accustomed to his boss’ behavior.

She barely got the door closed behind her when Burke handed her a file. “Read quickly, the Justice Department will be here in about –” He checked his watch, “Forty minutes.”
“What is this?”

“The highlights of Neal Caffrey’s career as a confidential informant for the Bureau. Basically, his ‘greatest hits’.”

Olivia flipped through the folder, wondering just what she’d stepped into.

“Read.” Burke’s command irritated her and she looked up, ready to tell him she wasn’t his lackey, but the haunted expression on his face stopped her. She turned her attention to the file and was immediately riveted. It was like a bestseller, the kind you’d read and enjoy and leave behind in the seat pocket. Kidnappings, bank robberies, industrial espionage, corrupt politicians, corrupt judges. During his three years as a CI, Caffrey had been assaulted, kidnapped, beaten, shot at, had his life put in jeopardy dozens of times. He was put into the middle of high-stakes operations with no training and saved the lives of agents and civilians on numerous occasions, often without any backup.

She had to ask, though, “What about the ones that went south? The operations that weren’t successful?”

Burke chuckled. “There weren’t many. Our conviction rate was ninety-three percent. I think the seven percent delta was due to the incompetence of the prosecution.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me. No one is that perfect.”

The man shrugged. “We were pretty damn close. That’s why they wouldn’t let go of him. Why – even now, after everything Neal’s been through – they think that they can still use him.”

There was so much rage in Burke’s voice that the hair stood up on the back of her neck. He reminded her of Elliot during his darker moments, when he was one step from shattering the world around him.

“What will you do if they insist on keeping him to the letter of his parole agreement?”

Burke was saved from answering when his phone rang. It seemed that the Justice Department representatives were here. He stood up and motioned for her to come with him. “Time for the next act in this farce.”

Three people were brought into the conference room and introductions were made. In addition to Peter’s boss, there were two attorneys from the Department of Justice, apparently up from D.C. She was surprised that these weren’t ordinary staff members from the U.S. Attorney’s office. Carla Wang was sent by the U.S. Parole Commission’s general counsel’s office, and Adam Harper reported directly to the U.S. Attorney General, himself. The Feds were bringing a hell of a lot of firepower to bear.

Instead of deferring to his superior, Burke took the head of the table, intent on controlling the meeting. Olivia had to wonder how effective he’d be, given how little control he had over his temper. However, Burke managed to present, if not an amiable front, a cordial one – at least for the moment. “Shall we get started?”

Any hopes that she had for a reasonable outcome were in vain. The DOJ team seemed as bullheaded on the subject of Caffrey’s early release as Peter was on his position that Neal deserved every single consideration.

Carla Wang tapped her pen against a file, looking thoroughly annoyed. “I don’t know why we’re even here. Neal Caffrey is a criminal convicted in Federal Court in 2005. He doesn’t get parole. Full
stop, end of story.”

Burke exploded at the woman. “Seriously? Seriously? That’s it? That’s your argument? He doesn’t get any consideration simply because Federal parole was abolished in 1987? Have you even read Caffrey’s record? Do you know how many times he risked his life? How many lives he’s saved? How many cases this office closed because of his information and his assistance?”

Wang didn’t seem to care. “We’ve heard all about Caffrey’s record, Agent Burke. I personally spoke with Phillip Kramer before making this trip. He had a lot to tell me about how chummy you and Caffrey were. And I suppose you’ll say that they’re all lies, that Kramer had a vendetta against you and Caffrey and is doing everything he can to smear your record.”

Burke didn’t rage or deny anything. He laughed, instead. “Ah, Philip Kramer, my former mentor. He would have a few uncomplimentary things to say about Neal. And me. Not without reason. Philip Kramer’s at the end of a long and distinguished career. He wanted Neal in D.C. as his CI, to help polish his legacy. Neal wasn’t interested in working for Kramer and I wasn’t interested in helping Kramer violate Neal’s civil rights.”

That got the attention of the AG’s representative, Harper. “What do you mean by that?”

“Agent Kramer had every intention of keeping Neal on a leash for years, well past his actual sentence. He wasn’t shy about his plans on using every trumped up excuse to extend Neal’s probation, tacking years on however he could. Neal got wind of that – it was why he ran. A bit shortsighted, but in an interesting twist of events, Neal helped capture one of the FBI’s Most Wanted. Robert MacLeish, remember him?”

Olivia watched the by-play between Peter and the Feds – she couldn’t seem to count the FBI agent as one of them – they served, he volleyed and the arguments went back and forth, getting more and more heated. The section chief, Bruce McKinsey, stayed quiet and she wasn’t sure which side he was going to come down on.

Taking advantage of a break in the ‘discussion’, Olivia asked, “Isn’t it customary for confidential informants to receive some form of consideration for their assistance?”

Wang responded, “He was paid.”

And Burke was quick to chime in, “Neal was given a seven-hundred dollar a month stipend for his housing. That was it.”

Olivia clarified, “That’s not what I’m asking. I’ve worked with incarcerated felons to help close cases. They don’t cooperate from the goodness of their hearts. There’s usually some quid pro quo – a few months, or even years, off their sentences for their help.”

Wang replied, “Caffrey was out of prison, on a GPS tracker.”

“That may be, but given the scope of his assistance, I’d think that he’d merit some greater consideration.” Olivia made a show of looking through the file that Peter had given her, “I see that he was once considered a candidate for a complete commutation.”

“And look how that turned out – he cut his tracker and ran before the Board could make a decision.”

“Only because Philip Kramer was going to arrest him immediately afterwards on a trumped up disturbing the peace charge that he didn’t even have jurisdiction to pursue,” Burke snarled, and that drew a startled look from his boss.
Olivia didn’t know what was going on, but she had the feeling that Peter might just have stepped into a pile of something unpleasant. She did her best to turn everyone’s attention away from that.

“Regardless, his record is pretty damn impressive, CI or not. And CIs are generally not expected to have their lives threatened. Repeatedly. I believe Caffrey has been put into physical jeopardy on numerous occasions, from his earliest assignment with the FBI. According to the files, Neal Caffrey was shot in the retrieval of a historically significant Bible. He was abducted, Tasered and beaten – but was ultimately responsible for the successful recovery of a kidnap victim. And one thing I found truly fascinating about that case – the FBI had pulled his tracker. He could have simply disappeared. Instead, he met with a man who wanted him dead so he could save the kidnapped girl. A few months after that, he was nearly murdered with a high-powered bow and arrow during the takedown of the head of a corrupt private security firm. The list goes on and on – and at no point was Neal Caffrey offered anything more than a handshake and a thank-you for a job well done.”

Wang gave her a sharp look, “And how do you know all of these details, Sergeant Benson?”

“Mr. Caffrey is the victim of a violent crime and given his history with law enforcement, one of the first avenues of investigation are the people he’s helped put away. I asked Agent Burke for a summary to assist me, and he was kind enough to provide it.” Olivia held up the folder. “My point is that after three-plus years of assisting law enforcement and repeatedly getting put into life-threatening situations, most CIs in his position would have long earned off their sentence.”

Harper, the representation from the Attorney General, sighed. “We’re not unsympathetic, but you have to understand the Government’s position here.”

From the corner of her eye, Olivia could see Burke winding up for another argument. His tone was cutting, “Which is? Let’s be clear, shall we?”

“The Justice Department can ill-afford to be lax with criminals. Commuting Neal Caffrey’s sentence, just so he can go on another crime spree, would be a nightmare.”

Before Peter could jump on that statement, Olivia said, “Neal Caffrey is in no condition to do anything. Legal or otherwise. He has a very long convalescence ahead of him – months, if not years, and that’s just from the physical abuse. Who knows if he’ll ever recover psychologically? There are no crime sprees in that man’s future, Ms. Wang, Mr. Harper.”

Wang, who seemed intent on being the villain, flippantly commented, “Well, then he’ll be remanded to custody and spend the rest of his sentence in a penal hospital facility. If he’s no use to the FBI in his condition, he’ll serve out the balance of his sentence where he belongs. In prison.”

Burke exploded out of his chair. “Over my dead body.”

McKinsey tried to caution him, “Peter – watch yourself.”

“No, Bruce, just no. I’m tired of ‘watching myself’. I’m tired of being the good soldier and playing by the rules while other people just don’t give a damn. The Federal Government’s been using Neal Caffrey like he’s commodity. Three years ago, I was right there with you when Neal got tossed back in prison after watching his girlfriend get blown to bits. I didn’t argue, even though an OPR agent was up to his neck in that mess –”

Wang noted, “That would be Garrett Fowler, the man you shot?”

“He was wearing a vest.” Burke tossed that off, as if it was the perfect excuse for shooting the man. “And that has nothing to do with the fact that the DOJ swept his involvement with the death of Kate Moreau under the rug.”
Olivia had no clue what was going on, but it was fascinating.

Harper commented, “Garrett Fowler’s serving twenty years for murder.”

“For the murder of the man who killed his wife, a crime that had nothing to do with his actions as an OPR agent. He was never charged with the illegal purchase of explosives or with corruption in the official pursuit of his duties. And you’re ignoring the fact that Neal was instrumental in capturing him.”

Wang countered, “I read your report on what happened at the Russian Heritage Museum – it’s got more holes than a wheel of Swiss cheese. Caffrey’s involvement in the apprehension of Fowler is suspect, and somehow I don’t think your report will stand up to closer scrutiny.”

“People, please – this arguing isn’t doing anyone any good.” McKinsey was playing peacemaker now. “We’re not here to dig through ancient history. Sergeant Benson’s raised a good point about Caffrey. Other felons, ones far less useful to the Bureau and ones who’ve been a hell of a lot more troublesome, have had their sentences substantially reduced for their cooperation.”

“And they’ve ended up committing crimes that have blackened the Government’s eye.” Wang remained adamant.

“So, this is all just an exercise in image control?” Burke looked ready to explode again. “It’s about good PR and making the DOJ look tough on crime? What about fairness? When did you forget that it's supposed to be ‘liberty and justice for all’? When did those words become just a meaningless parody? What you're doing to Neal Caffrey has nothing to do with liberty and makes a mockery of justice. You should be ashamed of yourselves.”

No one seemed to have anything to add. The attorneys muttered something about needing to consult with others before making a decision and left. Olivia wasn’t sure what to do, if there was anything she could do at this point. She should probably head back to the precinct; it wasn’t as if Caffrey was the only case on the board.

But the show wasn’t over yet. She made her own excuses and left Burke and his boss in the conference room. And then made the mistake of looking back. Burke was arguing – which was not at all surprising. McKinsey just stood there, letting Peter blow off steam. It was only when his hand reached for the badge on his belt that the Section Chief intervened.

Whatever he said seemed to have penetrated, because Burke stopped short of taking his badge off and he collapsed into a chair.

Someone sighed in relief. It was Agent Jones, who’d been watching just as intently. “I’ve always been afraid it might come to this.” It sounded like the man thought Burke’s resignation was inevitable.

“I thought you said you wanted to be Caffrey’s handler?”

“Yeah, there’s no reward without risk – but still…”

Olivia understood everything the man wasn’t saying.
Chapter 13

Sometime in Late January – Late Monday Night – Early Tuesday Morning

Peter rolled over, reaching for Elizabeth, only to find a cold pillow. Of course she wasn’t there. She was in Alexandria, living her own life. She’d called at some point on Monday afternoon, probably to let him know she was home. El hadn’t left a message and that, in and of itself, was message enough.

He opened his eyes and looked at the alarm clock – it was 12:36 AM. He’d been asleep for little more than an hour. This was par for the course, he’d nod off for a little while and spend the next four hours tossing and turning, lost in his anger and desperate desire to talk to the one person who he needed most in the world, but wasn’t there.

Like every night, his psyche offered him some excellent advice. Don’t be so fucking stubborn. Call her.

For the better part of six months, he’d ignored the rational, adult part of his brain, when all he needed to do was send his wife a text, You awake? Call me. The small, wounded child, the one who thought that El should have just known that he was in pain, that he wasn’t all right, won the battle and the war.

But not tonight. Tonight he wasn’t going to let that child win. He pulled his cellphone from the charger and went over to the window. Of course it was snowing again.

Peter didn’t bother with a text message first, it wasn’t that late. The phone rang twice before El answered.

“Peter?” There was a touch of panic in her voice.

“Hey, hon.”

“Is everything all right?”

“Everything’s fine.” No, it wasn’t – but that was for later in the conversation. “I just wanted to hear your voice. I couldn’t sleep.”

The silence at the other end of the line was telling and Peter wondered if this phone call was a mistake. “Hon?”

“I’m still here.” Her voice lacked something.

“Did I wake you?”

“No – I was just getting ready for bed.”

Peter took a deep breath. He had to do something to fix this, he had to try. “I’m sorry.”

Again, just silence.

He plowed on. “I’m sorry for everything. For what I said to you the other night, for what I didn’t say. For everything.” His heart was in his throat.

“I understand, Peter. I do.”
He had to state the obvious. “But you’re not forgiving me.”

She sighed, “It’s not that easy, Peter. Our problems didn’t start on Sunday, and they won’t end when I accept your apology or you accept mine.”

“When did our problems start?” Peter thought he knew the answer, but was still afraid to hear El say it.

“When I encouraged you to take Neal’s offer all those years ago. When our lives began to revolve around another person. When Neal Caffrey’s well-being became the most important thing in our daily lives.”

“El – that’s not true. You mean everything to me. I love you.”

“I know you do, Peter. I am not questioning that. It’s just … at some point, ‘we’ became ‘three’ and I’m not sure I can live with that anymore.”

“What do you want me to do?” He needed to hear her say it.

“What do you want me to tell you, Peter? To walk away? To let Neal fend for himself?” El laughed, a sad and bitter sound. “The time for that has long passed. You tried ripping off the bandage, it didn’t work.”

“He needs me, El – I just can’t abandon him.” To his own ears, his voice sounded thick, tear-clogged – but there were no tears.

“I know, and I can’t ask you to do that. I just wish …” Her words trailed off.

“What, El? What can I do?”

“No, it’s not ‘what can you do’. It’s maybe what you should have done.”

Peter waited for El to tell him, to speak her mind.

“Maybe you should have left him in Cape Verde. You told him to run; you should have just let it end there. They only found Neal because –”

“Because I was stupid enough to keep the fucking map in my closet. You don’t think I haven’t thought of that, El?” Peter was whispering because if he didn’t, he might just start screaming. “I should have let him go, but I couldn’t.”

Her reply was quiet and resigned, but there was no blame there. “No, you couldn’t, could you?”

Peter ached with regret, for all the mistakes he’d made, for how he ended up here, alone and estranged from the woman he loved more than life. “No, I couldn’t.”

“Then there’s nothing more to say, is there?”

Yes, there was. “I nearly quit today.”

If El’s earlier silence was painful, her lack of response now was like a knife wound. Finally, she said, “But you didn’t.”

“No.”

“Because Neal still needs you.”
He could have made a dozen different excuses, how he wasn’t a quitter, how he loved his work, how, despite all the bullshit, he still took pride in being an FBI agent, but he couldn’t. “Yes. The Bureau won’t let go of him and the Justice Department is making noise about having him serve the rest of his sentence in a prison hospital because it wouldn’t look good for the administration to be ‘soft on crime.’ I can’t let them do that.” Peter still hadn’t told El about the desperate message that Neal had sent, and he couldn’t bring himself to tell her how Neal blamed him for what had happened. Why he couldn’t bring himself to go to see the man he’d always considered his best friend.

“And that’s the story of our lives, Peter. Neal needs you, you protect him. You sacrifice everything for him.”

He couldn’t deny that, but it wasn’t the whole truth. “Not everything, not you, El – I would never sacrifice you.”

“But you already have, hon.”

“El – ”

Something in her tone softened, becoming more the woman he loved than the bitter stranger who left yesterday with so much pain. “Peter, I know that you love me and that you always will. I love you and I’ll never love anyone else. But we can’t go on like this. And asking you to abandon Neal is something I could never do. You’d come to hate me, hate yourself and everything that we’d built together would collapse under the weight of that hatred.” El paused, giving Peter a chance to absorb what she was saying. “You need to do what’s right – it’s like it’s in your DNA, and that’s why I’d never ask you to make that choice.”

The tears were falling and Peter made no effort to stop them. “Where does this leave us, El?”

And like that, the emotionally wise woman he married, the one who’d been absent for so long, was back. “It leaves us in a better place. No more half-truths about how you’re ‘all right’, no more pretending that your heart hasn’t been ripped out by what’s happened. You talk to me, hon. You call me and you tell me what’s happening. You don’t compartmentalize your feelings. I’m your wife, damn it, and let me be that.”

“I’m sorry, El - for everything.”

“I am, too. I’m sorry for not being there for you, for not believing you. For every horrible moment you’ve gone through alone. And I’m sorry for what’s happened to Neal and what’s going to happen to him.”

“But you’re not coming back home, are you?”

There was another telling pause. “No, not now. And it’s not because of my job. If I thought coming back to New York was the answer, I’d resign immediately, because nothing is more important than you and me. But ‘you and me’ can’t be fixed by simple proximity.”

That was a hard truth. “Do you think we can be fixed?” Peter knew he sounded needy and he didn’t care.

“I love you too damn much to give up on you. But I can’t expect you to work on ‘us’ when you’ve got so much else to do. Neal needs you, right now he needs you more than I do. Concentrate on that. Go see him, Peter - he needs you so desperately. Talk to him, be his friend. That’s what you both need.”
“I love you, El.” And despite all the promises they’d just made to each other, Peter couldn’t bring himself to say, *But I can’t see him, it’ll only make everything worse.*

“And I love you, Peter. Now, get some sleep and we’ll talk tomorrow.”

Peter’s lips twitched up in a slight smile at her command and he ended the call.

He got back into bed, but he couldn’t fall asleep. As the minutes ticked into hours, Peter could hear everything that El didn’t say – every undercurrent and double meaning. He knew that he had heard what she wanted him to hear, but it wasn’t the whole truth. Yes, she loved him - always, just as he loved her. And neither of them was giving up. But the sad, horrible truth was that Neal, as competent and capable and independent as any person he’d ever met, would never stop needing him. And he’d never stop helping him.

So where did that leave *them*?

Elizabeth stared at her cellphone screen until it went dark. She’d done her best to force a note of hope into her words, but she couldn’t convince herself. Her life with Peter was irrevocably changed. Maybe if she hadn’t left New York, maybe if she’d been there to help Peter deal with Neal’s absence every day, it wouldn’t have come to this. And the truth of the matter was, Neal would always need Peter. It was never going to end.

Until this moment, she had never regretted urging Peter to accept Neal’s offer to catch the Dutchman. Not through the drama with Fowler, or with Peter’s kidnapping - hell, her own kidnapping. Not even when Peter spent six weeks in jail on a murder charge because he was trying to help Neal’s father. Until now, she never regretted Neal’s presence in their lives, for the simple reason that Neal had made her husband a better man.

Peter, before Neal, was a good man. One who loved her unconditionally, but also a man who saw the world in simple shades of black and white. Right was right and wrong meant prison. Neal changed that – he’d taught Peter that all the shades of gray mattered, too – and in doing so, he unleashed something wonderful in her husband. Dedication became tempered by compassion, fierce intelligence by emotional understanding. Peter was all that he’d ever been, and so very much more. She loved the better man that Peter had become, infinitely more than the wonderful man he had been.

And now she’d lost that better man, and it was her own damn fault.

El put the cellphone onto the nightstand and climbed into her lonely bed. The one she’d made for herself. She couldn’t go back, but she didn’t know how she was going to be able to go forward.

Neal tossed and turned, hot and restless and in pain. Earlier, he’d asked the nurse to hold off on the nighttime dosage of Percocet. He hated the dreams the drug brought, they were so strange and vivid and violent. Not true memories of what had happened to him when he’d been held captive, but echoes, distorted and more disturbing that the actual memories. His tormenters didn’t wear masks, but somehow bore the faces of the people he’d loved: Mozzie, and June, Kate and Sara, even Rebecca before her own evil was revealed; they all took turns hurting him.

He might even have been able to tolerate those dreams, his body needed rest and some surcease from the physical pain, but when his tormentors became Peter, the anxiety was unbearable. The worst nightmares were when the man who had checked the plates became Peter – he’d find the clues he’d
hidden, the tiny marks that spelled out “help me peter” in Latin and laugh and laugh and tell him that he’d given up on him, that he was nothing more than a criminal who was getting everything he’d deserved.

So he lied through his teeth and told the nurse he didn’t need anything more than a single Advil to manage the pain. She was skeptical, but short of shoving the other medication down his throat, there was nothing she could do.

Neal managed to roll over and got a look at the monitor that tracked his vitals. The time on the display read 2:20 AM. So he must have dozed off at some point. He shifted uncomfortably against the mattress. It was designed to prevent bedsores, inflating and then deflating, but it didn’t work properly. There was a big, sagging gap in the middle and unless he wanted to plaster himself against the bed rails, he’d have to let his body sag with it.

“You okay?”

The question startled Neal. He didn’t realize that there was anyone else in the room. He reached for the light switch, but couldn’t find it.

“Neal, are you okay?”

That voice – he knew that voice. “Peter – you’re here!”

“Yes, I am.”

Neal strained his eyes into the darkness – why were there so many shadows? He didn’t remember his room being so dark. “I’m sorry – I can’t see you.” He held out his hand, hoping that Peter would come closer, would take it. Would touch him. But he didn’t, he kept his distance.

“It’s okay, I can see you fine.”

This conversation seemed weird, Peter seemed weird. But he was here, at last and that was all that mattered. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine, but I’ve been very worried about you.”

“I’m safe now.”

“Yes, you are. I’m sorry I didn’t find you – I looked for you everywhere.”

Peter sounded so sad. “It’s okay – you weren’t meant to. They were good, they left no trace.”

“But you did, you begged for my help, Neal. You left clues and I didn’t see them until it was too late.”

“But it’s not too late, Peter. I’m here and I’m safe and you’re okay.” Neal was babbling but he didn’t care.

The monitors beeped with comforting regularity; from just outside the door, Neal could hear the squeak of someone’s rubber soled shoes and the rattle of a cart against the linoleum floor. Peter, though, was too quiet.

“I’m not so sure you’re safe, Neal.”

He swallowed, his heart started to race. “What do you mean? There’s a Marshal on the door, they won’t let anything happen to me.”
“That’s what I mean.”

It took Neal a moment to parse out Peter’s cryptic reply. “Oh. Oh – you think they are going to try to put me back in prison?”

“That’s what I’m afraid of. I’m trying to keep that from happening, you have to believe me.”

Neal felt the edges of his lips curve into a smile, it was an unfamiliar sensation. “Of course I believe you. You protect me, it’s what you do best.” He wished he could see Peter’s face, see him smile.

“I should go now, let you rest.”

“It’s okay. All I’ve done is rest.” And waited for you to visit me.

“You need to heal. You need to get stronger.”

Typical Peter. “I’m working on it.” Neal reached out again, desperate for that familiar touch. But Peter still didn’t come any closer. He closed his eyes and sighed as his hand fell back to the bed. “Okay, I’ll get some rest, but will you stay with me for a little while longer? I’ve missed you.”

Peter didn’t answer. Neal shifted against the mattress, trying to sit up. There was something poking at his backside. He reached for it, it was the call button and he accidentally pressed it while trying to pull it free.

A few moments later, light flooded the room as the door opened, “Mr. Caffrey, what do you need?”

He shielded his eyes from the too-bright light but looked around, desperate to see Peter. But Peter wasn’t there.

“I – I – was talking with someone – did you see who just left?”

“No, Mr. Caffrey – no one’s come into or left your room. There’s been no one on the floor who’s not supposed to be here.”

“No – Peter was here, I was talking with him.”

The door closed, plunging the room back into darkness. When it opened again, the nurse wasn’t alone, a blue-jacketed U.S. Marshal was with her. The man answered before Neal could even ask. “No one has come or gone, Mr. Caffrey. I’ve been standing guard on your door since midnight. You’ve been talking in your sleep, though – maybe it was a dream?”

Neal collapsed against the bed, lost and hurting. Peter hadn’t come. He’d never come.
Chapter 14

Sometime in Late January – Early Wednesday Morning

It was close to three AM when Clive finally showed up, sliding into the booth across from him. Mozzie had already consumed enough tea to make his bladder uncomfortable, but relief would have to wait. Clive spooked easily and if Mozzie wasn’t in the appointed spot at the appointed time, it could be weeks before he’d get another face-to-face. But he wasn’t going to let the man get the upper hand, there was too much at stake. “You’re late.”

Clive shrugged. “Sorry, I promised Madeline that I’d take care of the baby before going out. You know how four-months-olds are.”

Moz did, but that wasn’t relevant. He pushed back, “You should have let me know. I’m a busy man.”

“Sorry.” Despite the apology, Clive didn’t seem at all cowed. “But you’re the one who should be sorry, to be honest. You bailed on me, man. You’ve never bailed on me.”

“I had my reasons.” Moz had gotten Peter’s text about five minutes before he was going to complete the transaction for the dirty Franklins. He aborted the deal and then the news about Neal arrived. It took the better part of four days before he could get the details from the Suit about why he’d told Moz to walk away.

Peter was willing to let him play it out, he trusted him to put Neal’s interests above his own and as much as he despised the idea of helping the Feds put honest criminals out of business, he despised dirty criminals even more. And what the counterfeiters did to Neal was unspeakable. The Feds and the local heroes might put them in jail, but Moz would see them suffer in a hell not even Dante’s Ninth Circle could rival.

“Care to share those reasons?”

Moz pulled out a copy of a sketch of the guy that Neal said had kidnapped him. The artist the NYPD had sent to Neal’s hospital room wasn’t bad, as far as sketch artists went. Neal could have done a lot better, but his friend had enough difficulty talking about the bastard and what he did to him; expecting him to use his talents to draw that face would be a million times worse. “Is this the guy?”

Clive gave him a beady-eyed stare. “Why do you have a police sketch?”

Moz ignored Clive’s question and asked again, “Is this the guy?”

Clive insisted, “Answer my question.”

Moz was getting impatient with this game. “No, you answer my question.”

“Not until you tell me why you have an official police sketch. You don’t deal with the police.” Clive dramatically sniffed the air. “You know what? It’s beginning to smell like ‘rat’ here. It’s time I was gone.” He started to slide out of the booth, but his way was blocked.

The Old Gray Suit slipped into the booth next to Clive, effectively imprisoning him.

“What the hell? Who the fuck are you?” When Hughes didn’t answer, Clive turned to Moz. “Who the fuck is this guy?”
Moz deadpanned, “My twin brother. He doesn’t say much, but he has an affinity for making people talk.”

Clive looked from him to Hughes and back to him; his normally dark skin was now a sickly shade of gray.

“I don’t know you anymore, man – this isn’t you. You don’t work with muscle and you don’t work with cops. So tell me, what the fuck is going on.”

“This guy,” Moz tapped the sketch, “is a wanted man.”

“Hey, we’re all wanted, you know that.”

“Wanted by me. And by my brother, here.”

“Why?”

Clive’s question was reasonable. But all Moz could think of was Neal in the hospital, battered and broken, almost in tears because he’d brought him a silly pastry. He wasn’t inclined to reasonableness. “Tell me if this is the guy who wants to sell the paper.”

Refusing to answer, Clive’s jaw jutted forward and he stared out over Moz’s shoulder.

Moz looked at Hughes and nodded.

The Old Gray Suit commented, “You have children, Clive.” That wasn’t a question. Moz didn’t know what to think. Was he really threatening the man’s family? His calm, almost casual tone made the hair on the back of Mozzie’s neck stand up.

Clive sucked in his breath.

The old man continued, “Children are wonderful. I don’t have any of my own, but I have people I consider my family, my children. This man – ” Hughes gestured at the sketch, “hurt someone I think of as a son. Hurt him badly. He wanted to force his compliance and then tried to kill him.” The old man’s voice never went above a conversational tone, but the intensity of his words was chilling.

Clive picked up the sketch, his hands were shaking. Hughes relaxed against the booth and Moz took back the conversation.

“You remember my friend Neal?”

Clive nodded. “He took off for parts unknown a few months back. Or so I heard.”

“You heard wrong. This son of a bitch grabbed him, tortured him and made him create the plate for those Franklins he wants you to move.” Moz poked at the sketch, his emotions overtaking him, voice too loud in the empty coffee shop. “When they were done with him, he stabbed Neal and dumped him on the street like he was some piece of trash.”

Clive finally understood. “Man, I didn’t know – I mean I thought the guy was kind of squirrelly but I didn’t know how he got the stuff. Brinker – you remember him from the Watteau job – he was the one who put this guy in touch with me, and Brinker’s always been solid. He’s never steered me wrong. He’s been brokering the deal. I only met with this guy once – him and an older dude. Slick bastard with a fancy accent. They were there when I saw the goods, them and a lot of muscle. But you would have met with Brinker to close the deal if you hadn’t gone tits up on me last week.”
“I need to talk to Brinker.”

Clive shook his head. “No – I’m supposed to be a vault. If people can’t trust me, then I’m out of business. How am I supposed to feed my babies? I’ve got bills to pay.”

Hughes casually asked, “I think the question is: how are you going to feed your nine children from inside a Federal Prison, Mr. Hanover?”

Clive all but tried to climb over the back of the booth in his panic. “How the hell did you find that out? No one knows my name.”

Under different circumstances, Moz might have sympathized with Clive’s distress. But Neal needed him and that trumped even his own enjoyment of this theater of the absurd. He tossed a little more fuel onto the fire. “My brother and I know lots of things. And the way I look at it, you don’t have a lot of options. So give us Brinker.”

He could see the muscles clench in Clive’s jaw. “You’re fucking crazy if you think I’m giving you squat.” He pushed against Hughes, who didn’t budge. “Let me out of here.”

He caught Hughes’ eye and the man gave a very slight nod. Moz continued. “Put us in touch with Brinker and we’ll consider our business with you finished. We all walk away satisfied. You don’t help, and my brother here might decide to take things personally.”

Clive finally caved, but with poor grace. “For the record, I’m doing this under extreme duress.”

Triumph was a sour taste on his tongue. “You’re going to call Brinker right now, you’re going to arrange for another meeting and you’ll make it clear that my brother and I are not interested in meeting with a flunky – we do business with the top dog or we don’t do business at all.”

Sometime in Late January – Wednesday Afternoon

Monday had been a good day. Monday, he felt like he was going to get out of here. Then Tuesday night happened – or didn’t happen - and all the progress he’d made was gone as if it had never existed.

Today he wondered if he was even going to survive.

Yesterday, he’d woken up hot and distressed, his hospital gown almost too much to bear. It seemed like ages before a nurse came in and took his temperature – it was soaring. Despite the antibiotics they were pumping into him, his wound had developed an infection. Doctors were in and out all day, poking at him, prodding him, doing things to him that made him want to scream.

Matters escalated from there, he began having trouble breathing – it felt like he was drowning. The doctors came in, listened to his lungs and muttered something about air and fluid in the chest wall. Neal listened as the doctors argued – one was worried about the infection spreading, the other said that there was a greater risk from the collapsed lung. All night he fought for breath, the nasal cannula couldn’t seem to feed him enough air. This morning, he was prepped for the minor surgery needed to insert a chest tube, so minor that it was done in his hospital room. It hurt, and it was kind of disgusting to watch the container fill up with fluid, but at least he could breathe again.

The nurses were kind and helped him deal with the humiliation of being completely bed-bound, and after everything he’d been through, having to use a bedpan was a fairly minor one. What was harder to deal with was the loneliness and the boredom. His condition had been downgraded and standard
infection-risk precautions limited his visitors. June stopped by after the procedure, donning the protective gear, which didn’t even seem worth the effort since she was only allowed to stay for five minutes. Mozzie, naturally, was completely absent. Hughes was, too. Although he’d left a message for Neal that things were progressing and not to worry.

That was something, he supposed.

He tossed his head against the hard, inadequate hospital pillow, shifted against the sagging mattress and tried to be reasonable. It wasn’t so long ago that his “bed” was a cement platform in a windowless cell, and rather than kind nurses helping him with his catheter, there were faceless men beating the shit out of him. But it was hard to be rational when everything hurt. The pain was almost as bad as it had been when he’d first realized he was safe, in a hospital, and no longer waiting for the next round of torture and rape.

Neal deliberately tried to change the pattern of his thoughts. He was not chained in a dark room, his body and will shattered, forced to do something illegal. He kept telling himself he was safe, he was healing and this was a minor setback, but logic couldn’t keep the demons at bay. The drugs, particularly the painkillers, were breaking down the walls between reason and desolation. He turned his head away from the light and wasn’t surprised to feel tears pouring down his cheeks.

“Neal?”

He turned back, surprised to hear a familiar voice. “Diana?”

Her face was covered by a mask and she was wearing a protective gown over her clothing. “Hey, how are you doing?”

“Been better, been a lot worse.” Just her presence here made the situation a lot more bearable.

“What’s going on? The docs won’t tell me anything. I’m not family.”

Neal reached out and grabbed her gloved hand. “Yes, you are – but I’m too tired to explain.”

She gently squeezed his fingers. “Can you tell me what’s going on?”

He swallowed and tried to gather his thoughts. “Right now, not so hot. Since you're in the gear, you know I’ve got an infection and a fever.” He lifted his other hand, the one with the IV in it. “I’m on some powerful antibiotics. And my lung, where I was stabbed, it has problems too. I think the docs said that there was blood and fluid in the chest wall. They had to put in a drain to get it out.”

“Sounds like fun.” Trust Diana to underplay the trauma.

Neal could see the smile behind the face mask, in the crinkles at the corner of her eyes. “I’m being a pain.”

“What else is new? You’re always trouble, knew you’d be from the first time I set eyes on you. Remember, at the airport?”

“You looked at me like I was pond scum.”

“Eh, you were flirting. Two days out of prison and you behaved like the world was your oyster”

He smiled at the memory. “You liked it, you liked me, and you definitely liked the hat. Admit it.”

Diana shrugged. “Yeah, of course I did. I wasn’t interested – I’ll never be interested, but there’s
nothing wrong with a good looking man finding me attractive.”

“Ah, so you admit I’m good looking!” Neal tried not to laugh, it hurt too much. This comfortable banter with Diana was the most normal conversation he’d had with anyone since, since Cowboy Boots had grabbed him off the street.

“You don’t need me to feed your ego, Caffrey. But yeah, you’re good looking and I do like you. And if you tell anyone I ever said that, I’ll make you wish you had warts, a harelip and a hairline that starts somewhere in the middle of your back, spreads across your shoulders and ends at your earlobes.”

He couldn’t help but laugh, which turned into a wet, choking cough. He struggled, trying to sit up and Diana gingerly tried to help him get into a more comfortable position.

“Sorry.”

“Nah, it’s okay. Like I said, you’re trouble, but I don’t mind.”

Neal felt himself become more centered, more grounded by Diana’s casual behavior. Moz, as wonderful as he’d been, still treated him like he was made from butterfly wings and eggshells. He knew that time was running out, a nurse would come in to tell Diana she had to leave, so Neal screwed up his courage and asked the question he’d asked El, the question she couldn’t answer. The question no one would answer. “Why hasn’t Peter been to see me?”

Diana blinked, confusion evident in the arch of her brows. “What? He hasn’t?”

“No – I haven’t seen him at all. At first, it was because the police, the Treasury Department, the Marshals – they needed to get my statement and Reese – Agent Hughes – said that Peter and the White Collar division were too close, that they couldn’t see me until after everything had been cleared. But you and Clinton came in right after the interview, and Clinton came back on Sunday. Even Elizabeth came by before she went back to D.C. But Peter hasn’t been in to visit, not once.”

He wasn’t going to tell her that Peter was a frequent visitor in his dreams and his nightmares.

He struggled against the rising tide of emotion and then just surrendered to the current. “I want to see him; I want to tell him that I didn’t run, that I wasn’t going to run.” The sob hurt more than the earlier laughter. “I thought … ” Neal closed his eyes, this time the tears started and shamed him, “we were friends.”

He scrubbed at his face. “I’m sorry – I don’t mean to be such a baby. It’s just – just that I really want to see Peter. I know he’s in New York but I don’t know why he can’t see me. Do you?”

It was hard to read Diana’s face behind the mask, her eyes were wide open, but he couldn’t tell if she was surprised at Neal’s question, upset at his childish behavior, or something else entirely.

“I don’t know why he hasn’t been in, but Neal, Peter looked for you. He went through every case you’d ever worked on, he went to see Rachel; he went to see every person you’d helped put behind bars. He skirted disciplinary hearings and suspensions because he’d been ordered to back off, finding you was not his job. The Marshals were responsible for looking for you, they thought you were a fugitive, but Peter never did.” Diana sighed and shook her head. “I know that nothing – no case – has been more important to Peter than finding you. And since you turned up here, he’s been working his ass off to get the Justice Department to let you go free. But I don’t know why he hasn’t been to see you.”

The nurse in charge of his case had excellent timing, she came in to get Diana out. “Ma’am – you
need to leave. We need to work on Mr. Caffrey and then he has to rest.” She fussed with his IV and checked the monitors before getting into a staring contest with Diana.

Diana gave in, “Neal – I’ll talk to Peter. I’ll try to find out what’s going on, okay?”

Neal nodded. There was nothing else he could do.

“And I’ll be back, like the Terminator – so behave yourself.”

Neal gave Diana a watery smile, pretending to feel a little better. “I won’t make any promises, but I’ll try.”

Diana left and the nurse asked him about his pain levels. He didn’t want to tell her how badly he was hurting, because there was nothing she could give him that would take this pain away.
Chapter 15

Sometime in Late January – Wednesday Afternoon

Peter had spent most of Tuesday fighting with the Bureau, with the Justice Department, with the assholes in Treasury, and getting nowhere, or worse than nowhere. The last person he’d talked – or rather fought – with said that Neal was facing life in prison. The powers that be were of the mind that while Caffrey had certainly been tortured, that was irrelevant. He had probably left voluntarily, and whatever happened afterwards was his own fault. Unless Peter could produce something solid, like a confession from his so-called kidnappers, it looked like Neal Caffrey was heading back to prison for life.

There was a card in his wallet, one he’d tried to toss more than a few times, but couldn’t quite bring himself to. A simple flick of the wrist would send it into the trash basket, a clenched fist would crumple it; he could trap it between the thumb and forefinger of each hand and pull. It wouldn’t take much to rip it half, then quarters, then eighths. To make confetti out of a single, insignificant piece of cardboard.

But it wasn’t insignificant.

The card was a promise, a debt, a threat. He hadn’t thought about using it when it was only about him. He probably should have, but back then he’d believed in justice. He’d trusted the system, he’d trusted that the people he loved and cared for and who cared for him would work within the rules to see that justice was done.

And for a while, he’d believed that this was just what had happened. That truth and justice prevailed and the innocent went free. Learning it was all a lie was the worst moment of his life. The truth broke something in him, shattering everything he was and everything he needed to believe about himself.

Even though he still wasn’t sure he could be put back together, he swallowed the lie and he accepted what had happened. He had a wife and a life and the powers that be thought he walked on water. Revealing that it was all a carefully fabricated tissue of lies would only hurt the ones he loved. El’s life would be ruined and Neal’s …

Peter shuddered and refused to even complete the thought. He pulled out his wallet and found the card. For himself, he’d never make that call. For Neal, he had no choice. He looked at the card and swallowed hard against the rising sense of dread. This was going to cost him, and he was prepared to pay the price, no matter what.

The phone rang once, twice, and before the third ring finished, a woman’s voice – tight and clipped and as pleased as a cat who’d just swallowed the canary – said, “Special Agent Peter Burke – it certainly took you long enough.”

“Ms. Shepherd.”

“Call me Landon.”

Peter closed his eyes, gritted his teeth and kept a tight rein on his temper. “Landon.”

“What can I do for you?”

He took a deep breath. “I need your help.”
“I figured that’s why you’re calling me. But I would prefer to do business face to face. Meet me at The Four Seasons, at say … two o’clock?”

“That will be fine.” It wasn’t like he had a choice.

Diana left Neal’s room, stripped out of the protective clothing she’d needed to put on, scrubbed her hands and face for good measure, and left the hospital as if there were wings on her feet, all but running back to the office.

She wasn’t sure what was going on. She was appalled at Neal’s revelation that Peter hadn’t been in to see him. He’d been at the hospital on Saturday afternoon, waiting for the Justice Department and the NYPD to finish interviewing Neal. She’d thought it a little strange that when they were cleared to go in, only she and Clinton went. But she’d figured that Peter wanted to wait until things quieted down before spending time with Neal. She knew that Clinton had visited Neal again on Sunday and they both had gone over during lunch yesterday, only to be told that Neal wasn’t up to having any visitors. They’d come back to the office to find Peter pacing and talking on the phone, getting more and more agitated. Everyone could hear him shouting.

He’d noticed the staff was watching him and shut the blinds, something Diana had never seen him do in all the years she’d worked for Peter. But it wasn’t hard to figure out what was going on. Peter was arguing – with the higher-ups in D.C., with the Justice Department, with the people at Treasury. Arguing, and from the looks of it when he’d stepped out of his office, losing.

Hell, it was hard to believe it had been only a week since she’d gone with Peter to the Treasury Department, since they’d started pointing fingers at Neal for a counterfeiting scheme. And it was even harder to believe that the assholes at Treasury still believed he was part of it, despite the evidence of six months of torture written all over his body.

Ever since Neal had disappeared, Diana knew that Peter was walking a very fine line with the Bureau. Turning down the promotion had been only the beginning. He was still the best agent she’d ever met, but it was clear that he had stopped caring about the things that used to matter so much to him. Oh, not the things that made him such a stellar FBI agent, but the things which were the essence of Peter Burke – common courtesy, civility, patience, enthusiasm. His temper was uncertain, even with those who were on his side, and worse with the brass who seemed intent on putting Caffrey back in prison. Monday afternoon, watching the meeting with the higher ups from the Justice Department, she wished she was a fly on the wall.

Diana walked right past Clinton and practically walked over a probie who’d
approached with a file and a question on her face. She didn’t even bother knocking on the door frame and barged right in. “Peter, what the hell is going on?”

“Excuse me?” Peter’s tone was icy and under different circumstances, Diana might have backed down and apologized, but something was terribly wrong and backing down would only make things worse.

She shut the door and stood in front of him, her arms crossed. “I just came from seeing Neal.”

Peter went absolutely still. He didn’t say a word, he wouldn’t meet her eyes.

“Aren’t you going to ask how he’s doing?”

“I know how he’s doing.”

“You do? You know that his wound’s become infected, his lung collapsed and they had to operate – to stick a tube in him and drain the blood and fluid?” She tried not to get emotional. “How, I have to wonder, since you haven’t been to see him. At all.”

Peter finally met her eyes; his expression was flat and emotionless. “Until he finishes his sentence, I’m still legally responsible for him and his well-being.” The laugh Peter gave at that statement made the hair stand up at the back of her neck. “I’ve spoken with his doctors every day and the hospital called me early this morning before they operated. It was a minor procedure that they did in his room.”

Diana nodded, but she still pressed. “But you haven’t actually seen Neal. Why?”

“Di, please – ” Peter scrubbed at his face, exhaustion in every drawn line.

“Peter, I don’t understand. You and Neal, you’re friends. I’d think you’re his best friend, Mozzie notwithstanding. Why won’t you go see him?”

Peter spun around in his chair and looked out at the wintry skyline. The day was clear, the sky an almost painfully bright blue. “It won’t be good for him, Di, if I was there.”

If it wasn’t for the desolation in Peter’s tone, she might have thought he was talking about repercussions from the Bureau and the Justice Department.

“Why, Peter? I talked to Neal and he’s desperate to see you. He wants to tell you that he didn’t run, that he had nothing to do with what happened.”

“I know that, Di – and you should have told him that.” Peter didn’t turn back to her.

“I did, I told him that you never thought he ran, that you had worked your ass off trying to find him, and you’re doing everything possible to keep him safe, but Peter – come on. He needs to see you; he needs to hear the words from you directly.”

Diana refused to talk to the back of Peter’s chair and walked around the desk, forcing her way into his space. “Tell me why you won’t go see Neal.” She stood there, arms crossed and chin jutting out.

“The Bureau – ” Peter started to explain, but even with those two words, Diana could hear the bullshit.

She called him on it. “I don’t believe you. Neal’s given his statement, Clinton and I have been in to see him multiple times. And don’t tell me that we’re different – we’ve worked with Neal, we’re his
friends. If anything, I’d think that the Bureau would want you to talk to him now – especially if they’re doubting his statement. Neal trusts you, he doesn’t lie to you.”

Peter said nothing.

“What’s going on?” Diana gentled her tone.

“It’s my fault. It’s all my fault.” Peter’s words were a whisper, but the agony was like a scream.

“No! How could you even think that?”

“If I hadn’t found him, none of this would have happened.”

Diana was confused. “I don’t understand – if you hadn’t found him? What do you mean?”

“If I’d just let him go – back then. You know – after he ran.”

Diana blinked. “You mean, when he fled to Cape Verde?”

Peter nodded. “If I had just let it be, let him go, none of this would have happened. It’s all my fault.”

She stood there, stunned. Horrified. The weight of Peter’s guilt was finally understandable. If not particularly reasonable. “Peter, you couldn’t let him go. He was a fugitive and if Agent Collins –”

He cut her off. “Collins would have never found him if I hadn’t reached out to Ellen Parker. If I hadn’t used her to get in contact with Neal. I should have just let him go. Let him live his life, free of that shackle, free from danger. Everything that’s happened, every horrible thing that’s happened in my life, in Neal’s life, has stemmed from that single stupid act.”

“You’re an FBI agent, Neal was – is – your responsibility. You couldn’t let it go. He runs, you chase him.”

“Not that time. It should have ended there. I told him to run. That day – I signaled him. I knew what Kramer had planned. He would have walked into that building, Phil would have slapped a set of cuffs on him and hauled him back to D.C. and he’d never have gotten his freedom.”

Diana had always suspected that Peter had tipped Neal off about Agent Kramer, but she hadn’t realized that he’d told him to run. “Peter, listen to me – this isn’t your fault. You did what was right – back then, and now. You can’t blame yourself for this.” She reached out and rested a hand on Peter’s shoulder. She’d give him a hug, but it didn’t seem right, at least not in this fishbowl of an office.

“He blames me, too.” This time, when Peter spoke, his tone was casual, as off-hand as if he was talking about what he’d had for lunch.

“No, he doesn’t. I’ve talked to him and he’s anxious to see you, he wants to see you. He misses you.”

Peter shook his head and blinked rapidly. Diana realized that he was crying. Or trying not to. “The night that Sergeant Benson came looking for Clinton and found me, we both went to the hospital. Neal was awake, conscious.” Peter wiped his face and looked as his fingers, as if he was surprised at the dampness he found there. “He looked at me and said that this was my fault, that I did this to him. That I’d forgotten about him and left him to die.”

Diana felt sick. She couldn’t imagine Neal ever saying anything like that, not to Peter. “He must have been drugged, Peter. He didn’t mean that.”
“No, he meant every word, Di. And you’re right; he probably was under some powerful narcotics. But I’ve seen Neal when he’s been drugged – and it’s when he’s the most honest. He says he doesn’t lie to me, but we all know that he shades the truth like a damn rainbow. He’ll let me draw conclusions and inferences and they could be the opposite of the truth. But not when he’s drugged. He can’t lie, he can’t dissemble, he has no filters. He can’t stop telling me what’s on his mind, how he feels, even if it’s the worst possible thing for him. What he told me that night was what he believes, deep down, and you know what? He’s right. Not that I forgot about him or I left him to die, but that it was all my fault.”

Diana didn’t know what to say. There was nothing she could say that could change Peter’s mind. Guilt and grief were destroying him from the inside out and he needed a lot more help than she could give him. “What did Elizabeth say when you told her?” She couldn’t imagine Elizabeth not slapping Peter upside the head and telling him that he was crazy for thinking like this.

If possible, Peter looked even worse at the mention of his wife’s name. He licked his lips and finally met her eyes. “I haven’t told her. We’re … not really communicating too well right now.”

There was such a terrible wealth of unspoken pain there. She’d realized that Peter wasn’t handling Elizabeth’s absence too well, but she couldn’t imagine Peter and Elizabeth not being Peter and Elizabeth.

“Peter, you need to go see Neal, you need to talk with him. You can’t keep going on like this.”

“I –”

“Listen to me, Peter. Go see Neal, talk to him. You both need this.”

Peter’s eyes slid to some point over her left shoulder and he didn’t answer. Diana could see the muscles bunching in his cheeks, along his jaw and down his neck as he clenched his teeth.

“What are you afraid of?”

“Everything, Diana. Every. Damn. Thing.”
Sometime in Late January – Wednesday Afternoon

Telling Diana should have been a relief, a release of the terrible pain and pressure that had been riding him since Friday night. But if anything, he felt worse after making the connection to Cape Verde and everything that followed. Sick and angry and sad.

What had happened to Neal was his fault and he needed to make it right. Regardless of the cost.

Peter checked his watch; it was 1:30, just enough time to get to his appointment at the Four Seasons. He could only imagine what this was going to cost him, but he didn’t care.

Landon Shepherd was waiting for him at a table for two by the windows facing Fifty-Seventh Street. She looked much the same as she had the last time they’d met, like a shark in a very good suit and a pair of heels that probably cost more than his monthly take-home pay. She smiled, a tight curve that suited her austere features. Landon was not a beautiful woman, but she was striking and intelligent, and she knew just how formidable she was.

Good, because Neal was going to need every micron of that formidableness.

She stood as he approached and held out her hand. Peter shook it, unsurprised at the strength in her grip.

She didn’t wait for him to work his awkward way through the niceties. “I have to confess, I’m intrigued by your request to see me, Peter. Especially now.”

Peter wasn’t ready to go begging, metaphorical hat in hand. “Why is that?”

“I would have thought that you’d have come to me a year ago, back when you had that little legal problem.”

He had to laugh. “Some little legal problem. You’re a master of understatement, but no – I didn’t need your help then.”

“But you did. Had you called me, I could have told you that Andrew Dawson was for sale to the highest bidder.”

Despite the urgency riding him, Peter was intrigued. “And did you know who bought him?”

“I might have, but that information is no longer relevant. Or is it?” She raised one carefully groomed eyebrow at him.

“No, not at all. Just curious. Besides, I probably couldn’t have afforded him anyway.” Not that he would have dreamed of bribing the prosecutor.

A waiter came by to take their drink order, interrupting the thrust and parry of their conversation. Without even looking at the man, Landon asked for another dry martini, her second. Peter wanted nothing more than some ice water.

The man left and Landon commented, “No, you couldn’t have afforded Dawson, and you’re certainly not the type to offer a bribe of any sorts, but had you known that the playing field was so tilted, you could have done something about it. Like not spending six weeks in the Metropolitan
“That’s water under the bridge.” Peter wasn’t going to tell this woman that nothing could have stopped the events that had transpired. He’d been set up, Neal had been set up. Curtis Hagen and Rachel Turner had had them neatly boxed in and pulled their strings like master puppeteers. But that didn’t matter anymore.

“You still haven’t told me why you need my help, Peter.”

He hated the way she said his name, throaty and satisfied, like he was someone she’d been paying for by the hour. He deliberately ignored his reaction. He needed her, her skills, her contacts, and he couldn’t allow himself to be insulted, especially when the insult was so very intentional. He took a deep breath and plunged into the deep end. “I have a friend who’s in trouble, this time, through no fault of his own. I’ve tried to help him, but my influence is … limited.”

Landon cocked her head and looked at him and Peter could see the wheels turning. Her smile was chilling. “So, like a bad penny, Neal Caffrey’s finally turned up.”

He didn’t bother asking her how she knew about his relationship with Neal or how she’d known that he’d disappeared. Neal had testified at her former client’s trial, he’d set her up, and of course, she was friends with Sara Ellis. Sara had, like El, been convinced that Neal ran. At some point, he’d need to tell her the truth.

Peter was glad, though, that Landon didn’t know the details. “Neal was kidnapped and tortured for six months. A little less than a week ago, he was found. His kidnappers had stabbed him in the chest and dumped him out of a van on the West Side like a sack of garbage.” Peter took pleasure in watching the color drain from Landon’s face.

She swallowed and said, “I’m sorry.”

He nodded, accepting her apology. “Can you help?”

Landon didn’t look so smug and satisfied now, but there was still an air of calculation in her expression. “What do you need?”

“The Justice Department is being unreasonable.”

“They want to put him back in prison?”

“Yes.” He didn’t see the need to elaborate.

“They think he’s conning everyone?”

“They do, despite all of the evidence. The attorney from the Parole Commission even seems to believe he had repeatedly Tasered his own testicles.”

Landon visibly winced and got down to business. “How much longer does Caffrey have on his sentence?”

“If you include the time when he was held hostage, five months, two weeks, three days. Add six months, one week, four days to that if you don’t.”

“What’s the best outcome?”

“Neal’s sentence is commuted and he gets to recover and live the rest of his life undisturbed by the
“FBI, the Justice Department, or the police.”

“Until he goes back to a life of crime.”

“He won’t.”

“No?” Skepticism was rich in that single syllable.

“He gave me his word. He’s done with that life.” Peter knew that he sounded ridiculous, but he’d believed Neal then and he knew that Neal wouldn’t go back to the life now, not after everything that had happened.

Landon nodded. Not so much in agreement, but in acceptance of Peter’s belief in his own words. “Okay, what’s the less-than-optimal situation?”

“Neal’s put back on the tracking anklet and remains a CI for the rest of his sentence.”

“And the worst case scenario, of course, is that Neal’s put back into prison for the rest of his sentence.”

“No, that’s not the worst.”

“Oh?”

Peter hated giving voice to this fear, but he couldn’t pretend it wasn’t a possibility. “If the people who did this to him aren’t caught, there’s a possibility that the Justice Department will consider his ‘disappearance’ initially a voluntary act and deem him in terminal violation of his work-release.”

“And?”

“He goes back to prison for life.” His words were clipped, rushed, the even the sounds tasted foul in his mouth.

“But you won’t let that happen, will you?”

“No I won’t.” Why was she even asking that?

“No – I mean you won’t let that happen, right? You’ll do everything humanly possible to keep Neal Caffrey from a life sentence. Yes? No?”

Peter knew this was a test. “Yes, I will.”

“No equivocations, no conditions?”

“No, none.” Peter said the words, knowing full well that this was going to be the price he’d have to pay.

“You’d even kill someone?”

It was easy to keep the shock from his face, he’d been expecting something this. “Who do you want dead?” At least he was smart enough not to ask, *Who do you want me to kill?*

Landon looked at him, much like a hawk might look at a particularly plump and tasty hare. “No one.”

“Not yet, you mean.”
“No, never. I don’t need to resort to violence. But I wanted to see how strong your commitment is.”

“It’s unbreakable.” He’d killed to protect Neal before, thinking of Vincent Adler. He’d do it again, and in cold blood if that was the price of Neal’s freedom.

Her expression softened. “Yes, it is. I wish I had a friend like you. Someone who’d stop at nothing to protect me, to keep me safe. Neal Caffrey’s a lucky man.”

“He’s done no less for me.”

The waiter came back with Landon’s martini and an elegant bottle of water for Peter, and after carefully decanting the martini into the glass and pouring the water for Peter, he asked if they wanted to hear the specials. Peter had no appetite, but was prepared to go through the ritual of ordering and eating, if forto please Landon. But she seemed to have some sensitivity and sent the waiter off with a casual statement that they’d prefer not to be disturbed until she signaled him again. The man left and Landon peered at him over the rim of her glass. “I’m a regular here and they know not to bother me if I ask. The boy will get a good tip and I’ll be back with a dozen guests and a five-figure bill next week.”

Peter couldn’t care less about her relationship with the management here and brought the conversation back to what was important. “Can you help?”

Landon sipped her martini, letting the question hang in the air before answering. “Of course.”

“What will it cost me?”

She said with a light laugh, “Well, not murder.”

“What will it cost me?” Peter repeated. He was prepared to pay, regardless of the price.

“You’re not very good at bargaining, Agent Burke.”

Peter blinked at her use of his title. It was an unexpected gesture of respect. Or maybe it was a threat. He couldn’t tell. “I can’t afford to play games. The stakes are too high.”

“You’d sell your soul to keep Neal Caffrey safe, we’ve already established that.”

“Is that what you want? My soul?”

“I’m not Mephistopheles, I’m a businesswoman who understands the value of a favor.”

“I see.”

“I think you do. I think you see very clearly. But I’m going to surprise you.”

“In other words, someday, you’ll come calling to cash in that favor.”

“Now you make me sound like the sword of Damocles. You’re really prepared to go through the rest of your life, waiting for the other shoe to drop? Tell me, what are you expecting me to ask of you?”

Peter idly wondered if she was recording this conversation, if it was going to come back and bite him in the ass someday. Even though he all but told her he’d kill someone if she asked, he had a little sense of self-preservation left and just shrugged.

That shark-like smile came back and she nodded, conceding the round. “I’ll make this easy for you, because I like you. I like your commitment, your sense of honor. Your belief in the system is quaint
and charming and really quite rare. I’ll make a few phone calls, talk to the right people and get Mr. Caffrey out of the clutches of the Justice Department, the FBI and all of the government agencies that want a piece of him.”

“And in exchange?” He was compromised, his soul was already stained. What was a little more dirt?

“You donate ten thousand dollars to RAINN. It’s a charity dedicated to providing support for survivors of sexual abuse. It’s something important to me and they could use the money.”

Peter blinked. “That’s it?”

“That’s it. That’s all I want.”

Peter felt sick with relief. He’d been expecting that she’d ask him to destroy evidence, to throw a case, to look the other way when one of her clients crossed the line. He would have done whatever she’d asked; no objections, no hesitation. “Thank you.”

“Of course, nothing’s guaranteed and it may take a little while, but I can promise you that your worst case scenario won’t happen, nor will your next-to-worse case scenario.”

“Okay, I think we can live with that. A few more months on the anklet.” Peter was already working on how that would be handled, how he could ease Neal’s remaining time on his sentence. There was a germ of an idea, something so outrageous …

Landon interrupted his train of thought. “You can go now.”

Peter looked at her, startled. “What?”

“We’re done here.” She dropped a Franklin on the table and got up. Peter followed suit.

He held out his hand. “Thank you.”

Landon shook his hand. “You’re welcome. And get some sleep, Agent Burke, you look like shit.”
Chapter 17

Sometime in Late January – Late Wednesday Afternoon

A doctor came and checked the tube that led to a drainage bag collecting the fluid that had built up in his lung. She seemed pleased and told Neal that it looked like the infection had retreated. But he still had a ways to go before they could remove the precautions. He was still in a highly debilitated state and his wounded body was still prey for any opportunistische bacteria.

Neal didn’t like that word, ‘prey’. He’d spent six months as a sadist’s prey.

The doctor left and the nurses and aides came. There were IVs to check and pills to take, bedding to be changed. By the time they were finished, he was exhausted. Before the last of the medical personnel left, he asked if they’d turn off the overhead lights, he wanted to sleep. Or at least try to.

He must have dozed off and started to dream, because it wasn’t winter anymore and he wasn’t in the hospital. It was one of those dreams that were so hyper-realistic that he knew he had to be dreaming.

Which didn’t seem to make the dream any better.

It was early spring, and Neal knew that because the trees were mostly bare, but there were splashes of bright yellow – clusters of daffodils and the spill of forsythia. Here and there were touches of pink from the flowering trees just coming into bloom. In a few days, the air would be filled with petals, a warmly tinted snowfall.

He walked with a cane, moving slowly, carefully, like an old man who didn’t trust either the evenness of the ground or the steadiness of his feet. He was alone and all he knew was that this was a place he’d been told to go to and it was a place he’d been to before.

He was in a cemetery, vast and endless. Headstones and obelisks, memorials and crypts, marble glowing in the light as far as the eye could see. Neal pulled out a note from his jacket pocket; it was handwritten, but he didn’t recognize the handwriting: Section 29, Row J, Grave Number 15.

It was strange; to be in such a place of death and the birds were singing, taking delight in the burgeoning fecundity of spring. The sky was a soft blue, so typical of New York in this season. And while the setting was bucolic, it was still New York; the air was scented not with apple blossoms, but with the exhaust fumes from the tens of thousands of cars and trucks that lumbered along the highways that bordered this fine and private place.

Neal wasn’t sure why he was here, who he was coming to see. Not to visit Kate’s grave; the bits and pieces left of her had been buried next to her father, in a plot somewhere to the east of this point. Her grave wasn’t in a pretty part of the cemetery; it was set on a hill overlooking a vast sanitation plant. Whoever was buried in Section 29 was surrounded by century-old maples and sycamores and well-kept boxwood hedges.

He found Row J easily enough. There was a large crypt on one side of the path, topped with a confection of weeping angels, the marble worn by time; the Victorian banality of the carvings softened into something interesting. Opposite the crypt was a row of simple headstones, also eroded by a century of rain and snow and urban pollution. But at the end of the row was a new stone, and Neal counted the plots as he slowly walked along the path. Yes, the last stone was for number 15.

Dread slowed him down. He couldn’t imagine who was buried here. June wasn’t Catholic and he’d
gone with her to the Abyssinian Baptist Cemetery in Harlem often enough to know that this wasn’t Byron’s resting place. Mozzie had had specific arrangements in place and none of them involved anything like a traditional interment. Besides, he’d just seen Mozzie. And he’d seen June, too. He’d had breakfast with her that morning. She’d even brought him the note that was in his pocket.

And he’d talked with Clinton and Diana and Reese and Elizabeth. Everyone who was important in his life was alive and well and in communication with him.

Everyone but Peter.

No. No. No. He tried to stop, but his feet kept moving forward, that new gravestone looming closer and closer until it was in front of him, an impassible obelisk.

Neal closed his eyes and refused to look. He couldn’t bear it. But he had to look.

Peter Burke  
1963 - 2014  
Loving Husband  
Gave His Life For Justice  
Requiescat in Pace et in Amore

This was why Peter had never come to see him in the hospital, had never come to see him when he’d been released, when he was healing. This was why he’d been left to wonder and worry. No one wanted to tell him that Peter was dead.

He started to cry, he felt himself tremble, his whole body shaking, and he fell to his knees before the grave, beating against the gray stone until his hands were bloody. How could they do this to him? How could they keep this from him?

It hurt so much, he couldn’t breathe past the grief, he couldn’t scream for all the anguish. All he could do was beat his hands against the cold ground and weep for everything he’d lost. “Nooo, oh, god, no, why didn’t anyone tell me?”

“Shh, shh, calm down, Neal.” A hand swept across his forehead. The voice was familiar, soothing.

“No, no, no.”

“It’s okay, you’re safe, you’re safe now.”

He struggled to open his eyes, to break out of this horrible dream. And he did, only to fall deeper into another dream. Those eyes, above the mask, he knew them. But he knew to his soul, that those eyes were only another nightmare.

“Go away, just go away.” He turned his face away from that hand, that touch - he wanted that so much, but it was never there.

A voice, a different voice, broke through the nightmare. “Agent Burke, you’ll have to leave. You’re distressing the patient.”

It took too long for the woman’s words to penetrate, for Neal’s eyes to open, and when he was finally truly awake and turned back to the mirage, it - he - was gone as if he’d never been there. The only other person in the room was a nurse, checking the monitors, taking his blood pressure. Neal frantically tried to get out of bed. An alarm sounded and aides rushed to help her hold him down.

“Calm down, Mr. Caffrey. You can’t get out of bed.
Neal fought against the hands on his body, he tried to reach Peter. He couldn’t. It took all the strength he had, he fought against every instinct that told him to keep silent, but the scream erupted from him and he cried out, “Peter!”

After Peter had left the Four Seasons, he’d headed back to the office. Despite his focus on keeping Neal out of prison, he knew that he had to at least keep up some pretense of managing the division. There were always reports he needed to review, endless stacks of paperwork to move from one side of his desk to the other.

The crap that made his job such a joy.

Except that he passed the FBI building and kept on walking, all the way to Tenth Avenue, to Mount Sinai-Roosevelt Hospital, where Neal was. He didn’t let himself think too deeply about what he was doing, where he was going. If he did, he’d turn back.

Instead, Peter remembered Diana’s fury from earlier today, Elizabeth’s sad encouragement the other night. He remembered Neal, so angry that last afternoon before he vanished, when he’d told him that the Justice Department had refused to commute his sentence. He remembered a hundred good moments and just as many bad ones. One that kept coming back to him was Neal on top of that tower in Praia, waiting for him with a wary smile, and then finally with open arms, hugging him, welcoming him back into his life. And there was another moment, a little later that day, when they’d managed to get to Mozzie’s fortress in paradise, when he’d been talking to Hughes about bringing Neal back, reinstating his deal. He remembered how Neal’s eyes had lit up.

Yes, he could have – he should have – let Neal go after he ran, but Neal wanted to come back, too. Neal wanted that life back and wracked with guilt, Peter had forgotten that. He shouldn’t have.

He went to the nurses’ station first and was surprised to find Neal’s primary doctor there, filling out a report. They’d met on Saturday, when Peter had been waiting and watching as the Treasury Department, the Justice Department and the Marshals each had a go at Neal, and they’d spoken on the phone every day since.

“How is he?”

“Ah, Agent Burke – I’m glad to see you. Mr. Caffrey’s condition is improving. We’ll take out the chest tube tomorrow. As long as the infection doesn’t come back and he continues to make progress, he might even be able to get out of here by Friday.”

“That seems awfully ambitious, Doctor.”

The woman smiled, a wry twist to her lips. “Hospitals are terrible places for sick people. Mr. Caffrey’s going to need long term rehabilitation, both physical and psychological, and keeping him here won’t really help once he’s medically cleared. Which reminds me, I just got a message from your assistant. She said that you’ll need a complete written assessment of Mr. Caffrey’s physical and psychological condition.”

“My assistant?”

“Hmm, about ten minutes ago. Said her name was Landon Shepherd, and that you needed it urgently. She told me to email it to her directly – which seemed a little, well, strange. Especially since she didn’t have a government email address.”

Peter didn’t know whether to be pleased or outraged by Landon’s request. But he understood what
she was doing and he appreciated that she’d gotten right to work. “Send the report to both of us – when do you think it’ll be done?”

“I’ve scheduled the psych consult for tomorrow and I’ve asked Dr. Reissenger to expedite the report. Your assistant mentioned that Mr. Caffrey’s continued liberty was under determination. Honestly, I can’t imagine him in any condition to do any harm to anyone, except maybe himself.”

That shocked Peter. “To himself? What do you mean? You think he’s suicidal?” He hadn’t even considered that.

“And yet, you want to release him from the hospital. That doesn’t make sense.”

“I know – it’s a conundrum, isn’t it? But I’ve talked – in general medical terms, only – with his friend, June. She said she’ll watch over him, and her home is well equipped for caring for an invalid, that she’s got staff and will ensure that Mr. Caffrey gets all the rehabilitative therapy he needs. Alternatively, he can be released into an in-patient facility, but given his …” The doctor paused delicately, “recent trauma, being in a familiar environment, with familiar faces, will be better for his recovery.”

Peter had to agree. Hospitals were terrible places. No privacy, constant interruptions, constant noise. Neal would do better at home, and home would be June’s mansion, complete with an elevator to the fourth floor, servants to watch over Neal, the privacy to heal and rest and recover. It was also secure. Once upon a time, June showed him the system her husband had installed and she had updated over the years – wireless cameras that watched over the entire street, a state of the art alarm system on every window and door, not just the first floor but all the way up to Neal’s apartment, including the skylights. Her house was a fortress and as long as Neal was there, he’d be safe.

“Okay. Okay. I’ll get with June and we’ll get things ready for Neal’s homecoming.”

The doctor checked her notes. “Are you going to see Mr. Caffrey now?”

Faced with that question, Peter actually considered declining. But he’d come this far. “Yes, if he’s up to it.”

“He’s a little tired, but I think he’d be happy to see you. You’ll have to wear the standard protective gear.” The doctor made a gesture to one of the medical personnel behind the counter and he handed her a sealed package. “Put everything on – it may seem like overkill, but it’s not for your protection, it’s for Mr. Caffrey’s. Avoid touching him, even when you’re wearing the kit. You never know what you’re carrying along.” The doctor closed the chart and left.

One of the aides was kind enough to take his coat and jacket, but she gave his shoulder rig and gun a bit of a side-eye. Not that Peter would let a stranger take possession of his weapon. Ever. He donned the yellow gown, booties, gloves, face mask and cap and felt like a bit of an idiot as he made his way to Neal’s room.

There was still a Marshal at the door and Peter pulled down the face mask and identified himself. He hoped that he wouldn’t have to take off all of the protective gear and get out his ID folder. But the Marshal just nodded and told him to go ahead.

He paused at the doorway, thinking that there was still time to turn back. He didn’t have to go in. He
What? Be a coward? How many more people did he need to tell him that Neal wanted to see him, that Neal needed to see him?

He pushed open the door and found Neal asleep. He looked a little better than he had Friday night, some of the bruising faded, some of the gauntness filled out. But his hair was lank and long and greasy, threaded throughout with gray, the same gray that decorated the ungroomed scruff on his chin. Eyes closed, his lashes were like birds’ wings against his cheeks, melding with the deep shadows under his eyes. How could anyone look at this man and say he was anything but a victim?

Peter stepped into the room and sat down in the chair next to the bed, trying to make as little noise as possible. He was actually grateful Neal was asleep. It gave him a little more time to think about what to say. But as he watched his sleeping friend, he couldn’t seem to find any words but I’m sorry, forgive me. Maybe those were the only words needed.

In his sleep, Neal was restless. His fingers twitched against the covers, his legs were moving. He tossed back and forth against the mattress, as if he was trying to escape. Peter reached out and rested his hand on Neal’s arm, disregarding the doctor’s orders. It didn’t seem to do anything, as Neal’s tossing became violent, as he started to mutter, “No, no, no”

Peter could only imagine what horrors Neal was reliving, but the next words, uttered with such grief, “Why didn’t anyone tell me?” broke Peter’s heart.

“Shh, shh.” He tried to soothe Neal, resting his hand on his forehead, as if Neal were a fretful, feverish child. “Calm down, Neal.”

“No, no, no.”

Peter didn’t know what to do, but he tried to reassure Neal that he wasn’t in danger. “It’s okay, you’re safe, you’re safe now.” He stroked Neal’s forehead, his cheek, trying to wake him. It seemed to work; Neal opened his eyes and looked at him, his expression turning from confusion to horror.

“Go away, just go away.” Neal turned his face away, pulled free of Peter’s gentle hold. The monitors started to sound and a nurse came in, all but pulling him out of the room.

“What’s going on?” She didn’t answer him, rushing back into Neal’s room. He could hear Neal shouting and an alarm sounded. Other people rushed to Neal’s room and Peter stood there, terrified. And heartsick that he had brought this on. He tried to console himself with the thought that Neal hadn’t recognized him through the mask and the head covering. Then he heard Neal call out his name, a terrible, hoarse, grieving sound, and he couldn’t stop himself, he had to go to Neal, he had to see him, get him to calm down.

He pushed his way back into Neal’s room, past the medical people struggling to keep him on the bed. None of the nurses were wearing face masks and Peter pulled his off so Neal could see him, recognize him.

Shoving his way between Neal and an aide who was trying to put him into restraints, Peter wrapped his hands around Neal’s cheeks and forced him to look at him. “I’m here, I’m here, Neal. Please calm down.”

The desperate wildness faded. “Peter? Peter? You’re alive, you’re here?” Neal clung to his hands, holding him so hard that his fingernails punctured the gloves Peter was still wearing.
“Yes, Neal. I’m here, I’m alive.” Peter realized just what Neal must have been dreaming about, and it was his own damn fault. “I’m here, I’m here. I’m here.”
Chapter 18

Sometime in Late January – Late Wednesday Afternoon

The remnants of the nightmare were still wrapped around his consciousness like a heavy fog and Neal was afraid to breathe, to blink, to do anything that would change this reality and send him back to that terrible place.

“I’m here, I’m here, Neal.”

He started to shake, he couldn’t control the trembling and he clung to Peter like he was a life line. And maybe he was. Through endless days and nights, through the deliberate and systematic destruction of his mind and body, he’d held on to the hope that Peter would somehow find him; that at the end of this ordeal, Peter would be there to pick him up and help him survive.

Deliberately not thinking about any of the reasons for Peter’s absence, he tried to focus on the fact that Peter was here, in his room, by his bed, holding his hand. That he was safe now. He relaxed, but he didn’t let go of Peter’s hand. He didn’t take his eyes off Peter, who was staring at him with so much love and concern.

Then reality intruded. A nurse was bending over him with a syringe in her hand. “Mr. Caffrey, we’re going to give you a sedative. It will make you calmer.”

“No, NO!” He struggled. “NO – I don’t want a sedative, please.”

“You need to relax, you’re only going to injure yourself if you don’t.”

“Please, no. Don’t –”

Peter, blessed, blessed Peter, intervened. “If Neal stays quiet, does he have to have that?”

The nurse sighed. “The problem is that he doesn’t stay quiet – that’s why there’s a standing order. He gets agitated and starts to get out of bed. If he does, he’s going to fall and the tube in his lungs will get torn out. There’s also the infection risk.”

Peter looked at him, his face grave and filled with worry. “Neal, do you promise me that you’ll stay in bed and you won’t try to get up? You’ll behave yourself?”

He actually felt his lips curl into a smile. “Yeah, I will.” But he had to ask, “You’ll stay, though?”

Peter smiled. “Are you making your good behavior conditional, Caffrey?”

Neal had feared he’d never again hear Peter say his name with that combination of affection and exasperation. “No, but I’d feel better knowing that you were here.”

Something dark and sad crossed Peter’s eyes. “I’m not going anywhere, Neal. I’ll be here as long as you need me.”

At Peter’s vow, the world seemed to disappear – the nurse standing by with the syringe, the machines beeping, even the ever-present sounds of the hospital – all just fell away. “Thank you.”

He closed his eyes, exhausted again, but trusting that Peter would be there when he woke.

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Sometime in Late January – Early Thursday Morning

Olivia watched from her hiding place, behind a wall of empty storage drums in an abandoned warehouse in Hunts Point. They’d equipped the space with cameras and she was able to watch the entire operation in relative comfort. Except that it was two in the morning, as cold as Hell and Neal Caffrey’s friends were getting set to meet with the man’s kidnappers.

She didn’t like the idea of involving civilians in an operation, although she had to admit that Reese Hughes barely qualified as a civilian. He was a thirty-five year veteran of the FBI and her own contacts in the Bureau spoke his name with awe. The little guy, Moz or Mozzie, though, was clearly a civilian.

She wasn’t really sure what to make of him, but he strongly reminded her of her retired squad mate, John Munch. Like Munch, he was paranoid and fiercely intelligent with an almost pathological disdain for the trappings of authority. But there was a difference, too – Mozzie’s cynicism was tempered by a deep well of affection for his friend. Munch’s heart had been ripped out too many times to leave much softness behind.

And regardless of any similarities between Munch and Moz, Moz didn’t belong in the middle of a dangerous operation. But she had no choice. The go-between for the counterfeiters was squirrely and barely seemed to trust Mozzie, let alone Hughes. If he knew that the NYPD was involved, he’d rabbit and they’d never get the bastards.

The moment was not without some humor. Over her earpiece, Olivia heard Moz introduce Hughes simply as his “twin brother.” It was ridiculous, but it seemed to diffuse some of the tension on the warehouse floor. Brinker stopped pacing and biting at his thumbnail.

“You guys are late.” That was from Hughes, who was the designated heavy in this operation.

“They’ll be here. No worries.” Brinker sounded almost smug.

“I have the feeling we’re being set up. I can smell ‘cop’, can’t you?” Hughes grumbled at Mozzie. This was all part of the script.

“You want out? Because if you do, there’s the door. Don’t need you or your cash.” Moz was playing along perfectly, and Olivia had to wonder just what his background was. She’d never seen a civilian quite this cool in such a high-stakes op.

“I’m in, don’t worry. But if this goes south, I’ll have your hide tacked to my mantle and I’ll use your skull as an ashtray.”

Olivia had to cover her mouth to stifle her laugh at this extraordinary and out of character speech delivered in such casual and deadpan tones. She took a quick look around, the handful of NYPD and the Treasury Agents waiting to pounce were also desperately trying not to succumb to the humor of the moment.

Mozzie didn’t make it any better. “Well, at least it’ll improve the decorating in that monstrosity you call ‘home’. How all of your highbrow, blue-blood neighbors allowed that thing to be built is beyond me.”

Hughes chuckled, and the lack of humor in that sound sent the hair on the back of Olivia’s neck straight up. “De gustibus non disputandum est, mon frère.”

Brinker interrupted the men’s banter. “Shut up, you two – someone’s coming.”

And indeed, someone was. Two pairs of headlights illuminated the warehouse’s fitful gloom. A white Ford Econoline van drove in, followed by a black Mercedes. Olivia couldn’t believe the balls of these guys – or the stupidity. They actually held onto the vehicle used in the kidnapping and then used to transport Caffrey before they dumped him.

An older man, someone who looked to be the same vintage as Hughes, got out of the Mercedes. A younger guy, wearing what looked like cowboy boots, hopped out of the van. From this distance and with the lack of light, she couldn’t really see their faces. Not that it mattered.

Over her earpiece, she could hear the conversation.

It was the older man who opened the talks, and not surprisingly, he had a European accent – boarding school English overlaying something Slavic. “So, Brinker – you’ve brought two friends. That surprises me.”

“No names, man – come on, you know the rules. No fucking names,” Brinker whined and Olivia started to worry. If Brinker freaked out, this could turn into a bloodbath.

The Slav, for lack of a better name, held up his hand in a mollifying gesture. “Sorry, my friend. Didn’t mean any harm. I’m just surprised. Last week, when we first arranged this, it was just supposed to be one buyer, not two. That troubles me.”

Hughes stepped in, and Olivia wasn’t surprised when he spoke to the Slav in what was probably the other man’s own language. Of course she didn’t understand a word of it, but apparently, whatever he said seemed to diffuse the man’s concerns. Actually – there was one word she understood, tovarich.

Comrade.

So, maybe they were speaking Russian.

Mozzie interrupted them. “I don’t care if you’re discussing plans to re-enact the battle scenes from War and Peace, but I’m here to do business. In English.”

The Slav laughed. “You Americans are always so impatient. Nothing wrong with catching up on some news about the Motherland.”

“You can reminisce all you want about the whores you fucked in the shadow of the Kremlin, but only when we’re done here. I’ve got places to go,” Moz grumbled.

Hughes stepped in. “Keep a civil tongue in your head. And if you have better places to be, other things you’d rather be doing, you’re free to go. I need you as much as you need me.”

“And by that, you don’t need me at all,” Moz replied. If Olivia didn’t know that this was part of a well-thought out plan, she’d have believed that the two men really despised each other.

The Slav finally relented. “Hmmm, maybe you’re right. Let’s do this the American way – business first, pleasure later.” He made a gesture to Cowboy Boots and the man went to the back of the van. Olivia didn’t like that and she gave a subtle signal to her team to be ready.

But Cowboy Boots didn’t come back wielding a semi-automatic, he was carrying two large black bags and dropped them on the ground. He disappeared again and came back with two more bags. “That’s four million. All Franklins, 1991 series, non-sequential serial numbers, appropriately aged.” Those were the first words that Cowboy Boots had spoken.
Interesting, Caffrey nailed the accent – or the lack thereof – just right. Not a New Yorker or a Midwesterner or a Southerner. The cadence of his words seemed off, too. Maybe English wasn’t his first language.

Mozzie’s whining interrupted her thoughts. “I was told it was twelve million, not four. I came all the way out here for what, a measly share of squat?”

“Relax, my friend – this is only a third of what we have. The rest is in the truck. Which we’ll be happy to give you.” The Slav was in appeasement mode.

“We are going to check every bag and packet, you understand.” That was Hughes.

“Then it’s going to be a very long night.”

“I don’t care. Or should I say, we don’t care.”

“Then, gentlemen, I suggest you get started.”

Olivia relaxed and hoped that it wouldn’t take all night to go through the bundles of cash. The Treasury people were insistent on this step. There was nothing illegal about selling currency, per se, and while selling packets of paper covered with decoy bills might lead to a count of intent to defraud, that was a far cry from the host of Federal charges that could be brought for creating and distributing counterfeit currency.

Hughes and Mozzie got to work, and Moz kept up a stream of irritating comments. Periodically, Hughes would quietly tell him to shut up. It took about forty-five minutes to go ruffle through each bundle of counterfeit currency in the first four bags—making sure that the packets weren’t filled with blank pieces of paper. When they were done, Cowboy Boots took out four more. And finally, the last four.

The Slav, who’d remained silent and watchful for the entire process, spoke. “And what do you think? Does this meet your expectations?”

According to plan, Hughes answered. “I am impressed. Our friend here – ”, Hughes tilted his head towards Brinker, “provided a sample and I found it hard to believe that it wasn’t the real thing. When he told me that he knew someone that had twelve million to move, I almost walked away. It seemed too good to be true. I’m glad it isn’t.”

Olivia sent a signal to the team – “too good to be true” was the first code phrase. They were getting ready to close the deal.

The Slav seemed pleased. “Thank you. And now, my friends, I think it’s time to see your money.”

Moz walked out of her view, but she could hear his grumbling and grousing through her earpiece. He came back, hefting a slim briefcase. With a grunt, he dropped it on top of one of the empty barrels that littered the abandoned space. “Your money.” Moz opened the case, and even in the monitors, Olivia could see the light glint off the rows of gold coins.

The Slav was close enough to Hughes that she could hear his sigh of satisfaction. He approached and that satisfaction seemed to turn sour. “The deal was for five million. You are short by about four million.”

“There’s a million dollars in Krugerrands there. The perfect currency. Untraceable and quite likely to increase in value.”
“It’s not enough.”

“Moz.”

The little guy grumbled and retrieved a second case, slamming it down on top of the first.

Cowboy Boots entered the conversation. “You got another one of those back there?”

Hughes and Moz ignored the comment. “This is our final offer – take it or walk away.”

But Cowboy Boots wasn’t inclined to be ignored. “You know, we could take this, and the currency, and leave three bodies behind.”

Olivia brought the team to full readiness. This was turning bad. Except that the Slav stepped in. “My partner here likes guns and killing. I don’t. I also like the old expression about two in the hand – how does it go? Two in the hand is worth more than?"

“I think the expression you’re looking for is ‘a bird in the hand is worth more than two in the bush’,” Hughes replied laconically.

“Right, right. Two million in gold will do just fine. And we can do business again in the future, tovarich?”

“With goods that are this quality, I’d think so.”

Olivia was getting frustrated – the team had been on standby for too long and were losing their edge. They could wrap this up right now, if only one of that dynamic duo would give the code phrase.

Cowboy Boots, in a modest display of strength, hoisted both briefcases – each one weighed about forty-five pounds. He was heading for the Mercedes, but stopped and turned back. “You know, it’s really kind of funny – you of all people being the buyer.”

“Me?” Hughes asked.

“No, Short Stuff here. Considering who did the engraving work.”

Olivia couldn’t believe her ears. Was this guy going to talk about Caffrey?

“What do you mean? Moz spat out.

“You had a friend, Neal Caffrey, right?”

“I did. He disappeared.”

“Because I made him disappear. That day – right after you walked away from him. He came up to me, wanted to know why I was following him. Took two seconds to get him into the van. Took a month to break him. Took another five more months to use him up like a tube of toothpaste.”

“Where is he?”

Olivia held her breath, praying that Moz wouldn’t do or say something stupid and blow this operation to Hell and back.

“Caffrey? Dumped him like a piece of garbage on a back street off of the West Side Highway. Probably in the morgue, or on his way to Potter’s Field.”
Olivia was about to close in without waiting for the code phrase, but Hughes gave it anyway. “I think we’re done here. It’s been a pleasure.”

She gave the go-ahead to the team and they burst out of hiding, guns drawn, shouting orders for everyone to get down on their knees, hands behind their heads. Even Moz and Hughes, although they really had no reason to. Cowboy Boots started cursing and struggling and Olivia half-wished he’d make a break for it so she could shoot him. But someone got the cuffs on him.

The Treasury agents seemed far more interested in the black bags and the two cases of Krugerrands they’d provided, though she suspected that they were probably going to be facing a pissing contest over who got first crack at the prisoners.

It didn’t matter. They had Cowboy Boots’ confession on tape. He’d kidnapped Neal Caffrey, he’d overseen the torture and then left him for dead. She didn’t care if the time he served for counterfeiting ran concurrently.

Not in the least.
Sometime in Late January – Early Thursday Morning

Reese was exhausted. He felt like he hadn’t slept in days and it was quite possible that he hadn’t. Since Saturday, he’d been spending the better part of his days with Caffrey, or trying to call in favors to get Caffrey out from under the Treasury Department’s glare. Those efforts had been fruitless - they’d been determined to pin everything on the man, pointing to his record and deliberately ignoring the physical evidence. Reese felt like he was banging his head against a brick wall. On Tuesday, he’d even gone down to D.C. to plead his case but had been soundly rebuffed. He’d only been home for an hour before his doorbell rang.

It hadn’t been Peter, but Caffrey’s very strange friend, Moz. Almost against his better judgment, Reese had let the man in.

“I’m not here for another game of chess.” Moz had stalked into his living room, looked around like he was casing the place and sat down in his favorite chair. He’d given Reese a gimlet stare.

“If not chess, then what?” Reese had tried not to smile.

“It’s time we followed the money.”

Reese felt every instinct come to point. “You have a lead on the counterfeits?”

The man just nodded.

“How long have you known about them?”

Mozzie hadn’t responded to that question and refused to meet his gaze. Reese had decided that bringing out the rubber hoses wasn’t going to get him results. He’d poured Moz a glass of Scotch instead. A double.

Reese waited and watched Moz’s face, he could see the arguments chasing themselves behind those too-sharp eyes. He was a patient man, he had to be.

Finally, Moz had resolved whatever internal debate he was moderating. “I have a contact - he approached me a few days before Neal turned up. He said he had a lead on some very good dirty money.” Moz took a sip of Scotch. “I had told the Suit about it, I was going to work with him and the She-Eagle. Everything was set to go but then I got a message from the Suit to abort. That was the day before they’d identified Neal.”

Reese didn’t know what to make of this. Oh, he knew that Peter was “the Suit” and he could guess that “the She-Eagle” was Berrigan, but that Peter would deliberately interfere with a government operation was shocking. Or maybe not. He’d known that the Treasury was looking to pin the counterfeits on Caffrey, and of course Peter would do everything possible to prevent that. The message buried within the fake hundreds was, to him, proof positive that Caffrey wasn’t a willing participant in this.

But apparently something was up, something that brought this strange and paranoid genius into the den of the enemy. “Have they contacted you again?”

Moz had nodded. “My contact’s contact was pissed off that I’d pulled out, but there are no other buyers, it seems. So he’s still willing to broker the deal.”
“And you want my help?”

“I’m thinking that a man of your - ” Moz had paused, took another gulp of scotch, and continued, “skill and stature might be useful in this situation.”

Reese had smiled and took a perverse delight in seeing the other man blanche. “Okay, but we don’t do this on our own, we work with the police.”

“Not the FBI? Not the Treasury goons?”

“No - let them liaise with the NYPD - I trust the detective on Caffrey’s case. I don’t trust anyone else.”

“Then, Uber-Suit, we have a lot in common.”

Reese was a little taken aback by the nickname, but at least it connoted some level of respect. “Do you have a plan?”

Moz did, and it had played out without a hitch. He’d enjoyed threatening Clive and then that whole act at the warehouse with Brinker. It had been decades since he’d gone undercover and he’d forgotten the thrill - the rush - of a well-planned and executed operation. Moz had surprised him - not that he’d been following his lead, but that he hadn’t lost his cool and stayed on script when Cowboy Boots had confessed to kidnapping and torturing his best friend. Reese, if pressed, would have admitted to wanting to shoot the bastard in the balls.

After the arrests were made and everyone was hauled back to the SVU’s station house in Manhattan, he and Moz had watched the interrogation through a two-way mirror. Benson worked on Cowboy Boots, who’d refused to give his name. Perhaps to compensate for his earlier verbosity, the man was saying nothing, not even to ask for a lawyer.

Across the hall, Treasury Agents had been interrogating the Slav, who was just as silent. Reese doubted that either man would break.

Close to four AM, Benson had left the room, a frustrated look on her face, which brightened when she saw them. “You didn’t have to stay, you know.”

Reese had shrugged. “I wanted to see it through. But it doesn’t look like that will happen today.”

“No, but I’ve cracked harder nuts.”

Moz had side-eyed her at that comment and she’d smiled slightly, fully aware of the double-entendre. Moz had given him a look and turned to leave, presumably to head up to the hospital.

Benson had stopped him. “I’d prefer if you’d let me bring the news to Neal. It would be better coming from me.”

Moz had looked like he was about to argue, but Reese quelled him with a look before saying, “I think that both of us could use a good night’s rest. Right, brother?” It had pleased him to no end to see the little guy flush in annoyance.

“Okay - but you’d better tell Neal soon. He’s been through enough.”

“I know.” Benson gave him a tired smile and told him, “Go home, get some sleep. I’ll be in touch, okay?”
At some point, Moz had disappeared from the station house, scurrying back to wherever place he called home, but Reese had uniform drive him back to Yorkville. He’d let himself into the house, disengaged and re-engaged the alarm, and went upstairs without bothering to turn on a light. It was January, and there were still too many hours until dawn. Reese stripped and fell face-first into his unmade bed. As exhaustion claimed him, his last thought was that they did good.

Neal Caffrey wasn’t going to go back to prison.

Sometime in Late January – Late Thursday Morning

Bruce was beginning to loathe New York.

It was snowing again – a mix of stinging icy pellets and snow that somehow found a way under his hat and scarf, whipping against his face and at the bare skin at the edges of his gloves. It didn’t help his mood that when he arrived at the White Collar office, Peter Burke wasn’t in and he wasn’t answering his phone or responding to text or email. To make matters worse, his assistant had no clue where he was. She hadn’t seen him since yesterday afternoon.

Berrigan – one of Burke’s most trusted agents - was at her desk. He wasn’t such a slavish follower of protocol that he wouldn’t lower himself to ask her if she knew where her boss was. She was polite and respectful, of course, but Bruce’s gut told him that she knew something.

“He’s with Caffrey, isn’t he?”

Berrigan shook her head in denial. “No – I really don’t think so. He has been …”

“What?” Bruce didn’t have patience for her prevarications.

“Reluctant to see Neal. He hasn’t been to the hospital since Neal was interviewed over the weekend.”

Bruce blinked. “Are you sure?”

Berrigan nodded. “I saw Neal yesterday afternoon and he didn’t understand why Peter hadn’t been to see him.”

That didn’t even make sense, but Berrigan had no reason to lie. Caffrey might lie, but as lies went, this one seemed pretty pointless. “Okay, if Burke does bother to show up, tell him I’m looking for him and to answer his goddamned fucking phone.”

“Yes, sir.” She seemed a little cowed at his abruptness.

“Sorry – didn’t mean to curse at you.”

Maybe he was mistaken, because she laughed. “It’s okay – I’ve heard worse. I’m just worried. About Peter.”

That he could understand. “I’m going to head over to the hospital. Need to talk to Caffrey. Wanted to talk to Burke first, but …” Damn, he hated explaining himself to a subordinate.

Berrigan blinked and turned back to her work, equally uncomfortable. He picked up the small case he’d brought with him and left.

The weather was still foul as he walked the half dozen blocks west to the hospital. He tried to reach
the detective who was handling Caffrey’s case - Sergeant Benson - but she wasn’t answering her phone. He’d heard whispers that Treasury was working with the NYPD, but nothing concrete and he was hoping she had some answers for him. Or that maybe she’d talked with Burke.

Bruce cursed as he stepped into a puddle of unspeakably filthy slush and the liquid soaked through his shoe and sock to his skin. Bruce fought for control of his temper. He was going to see a man who’d been tortured and left for dead, a man who was, according to the reports he’d received, still gravely ill. A man who didn’t deserve to be on the receiving end of his bad mood.

He’d save that for Peter Burke, when he found him.

Bruce didn’t argue with the medical staff who told him that he needed to put on the equivalent of a hazmat suit. Not because he understood about anti-infection protocols, but because they gave him a clean pair of skid-proof socks and were kind enough to try to dry out the wet shoe.

They did ask him to leave the case with them. In fact, they really didn’t ask as much as order him to. It was locked, so it didn’t matter.

Caffrey was still in the same room, not that he would have had any trouble finding it - not with the blue-jacketed U.S. Marshal still standing guard. The woman looked tired and bored and she’d probably be very relieved to know that this particular assignment was about to come to a close. He identified himself and she all but rolled her eyes at him.

“I’ll need to see some ID.”

“Oh, of course.”

He lifted up the yellow gown he’d put on, fished out his badge and showed it to her.

The Marshal gave him a thin smile. “Sorry, sir. But Agent Burke chewed me out a little while ago about not checking IDs. He was right - I had made a rookie mistake and had let a cleaner come into the room just because she was wearing scrubs.”

“Agent Burke? Peter Burke? He’s been here?”

“He’s in Caffrey’s room now. He’s been there since yesterday afternoon. Hasn’t left since I came on shift. Marshal Willards, who I’d relieved this morning, said he had been here all night.”

Bruce ground his teeth in frustration. He should have figured.

“Are you going in, sir?”

“Yeah, yeah.” He lifted the paper mask over his face and the cap over his hair, feeling like he was wearing a Halloween costume. The Marshal held the door open for him.

Burke was there, in a chair next to the bed, his hand resting on top of Caffrey’s. Both men were sleeping. Both men looked like shit.

Bruce cleared his throat, hoping that the sound would wake Peter. It did. He blinked and as he realized who was in the room, his expression turned wary. Bruce was surprised that Peter recognized him under this get-up.

He let go of Caffrey’s hand and the other man shifted restlessly, but didn’t wake. Peter got up and silently gestured for both of them to leave the room.
He followed Peter down the hall to the small waiting room where they’d talked - where Peter had lost his temper at him - last Saturday. Just six days ago. This was the third time he’d been to New York in less than a week and Bruce hoped it would be the last trip for a long time.

He pulled off the mask and cap and stripped off the gloves; he had to wonder if any of this was still necessary. Peter wasn’t wearing a gown or gloves. But that really wasn’t the point. “I’m a little surprised to find you here. Your agent, Berrigan, said you were staying away.”

Peter nodded and sighed and scrubbed at his face. “I thought it was best, I thought I’d be more useful trying to keep Neal out of prison than sitting at his bedside. But I’m guessing, since you’re here, that the Justice Department has made a decision?”

Just a few days ago, on Monday, Bruce had watched and listened and mostly kept silent during Peter’s showdown with the Justice Department’s lawyers. Peter had been close to breaking then, a hair’s breadth from tossing his badge on the table and walking out. He’d been furious with everyone, including him. Bruce didn’t really blame Peter. The attorneys, particularly the one from the Pardon Office, had been shockingly unreasonable. Bruce wasn’t sure why she had been so adamant that the man be returned to custody. Caffrey was an asset, yes - but he wasn’t a violent felon, or one who’d give the government nightmares if he didn’t serve the last few months of his sentence. When he’d caught wind that someone from the U.S. Attorney’s office wanted him back in prison for life, Bruce had put his foot down. There was justice and then there was petty, cruel, mean-spirited revenge because Neal Caffrey had once made fools of them.

He’d been about to call in too many favors and go right to the Attorney General himself, when he’d gotten the call that sent him back to New York.

Right now, though, the look in Peter Burke’s eyes was heartbreaking. He was clearly expecting the worst possible news. “Yes, they’ve made a decision. It’s not final, though.”

“What do you mean, not final?”

“Before you go ballistic, let me tell you what’s going on, okay?”

Peter didn’t quite relax, but he seemed less likely to commit mayhem. “Okay.”

“The attorneys that we met with on Monday have all been reassigned, and Caffrey’s file is under review. It’s actually been escalated to the senior counsel in the Office of Professional Responsibility. But there’s no question that he’ll remain out of prison. I’ve been told, categorically, that Caffrey’s re-incarceration is not on the table and never should have been.”

The relief on Peter’s face was worth the hassle of this whole damn trip.

“But in the interim, Caffrey’s back on the anklet.” He waited for Peter to explode, but he didn’t. He just nodded.

“You’re okay with that?”

“As long as Neal’s not going to be sent back to prison, I am. Right now, that’s all I care about.”

Bruce understood. “Good. You have to fight that that battles you can win. I don’t know what the outcome will be - they may want him on the tracker for the rest of his sentence. And they may still want his services.”

Not surprisingly, that angered Peter. “Do you really think that he’ll be going back to his old job?”
“No - not for a while, of course.”

Peter laughed. It wasn’t a pleasant sound. “Not ever, Bruce. Neal Caffrey is terribly damaged - physically and emotionally. It’ll be months before he’ll be able to do anything more than sit at a desk and doodle, if he’s able to do that much. His career as a criminal informant is over. As long as everyone understands that. You’re positive that there are no expectations that he’ll ever be put back into the field?”

“There were no conditions or expectations on this requirement. Technically, Caffrey’s still on work-release because – ” Bruce trailed off.

“Because there’s no Federal parole. Any chance for clemency? The AG has been making a lot of noise about reducing sentences for non-violent offenders. Maybe he should put his money where his mouth is.” Peter’s tone was scathing.

“I think that’s what’s going on. But you have to realize that by the time a clemency petition makes its way through the system, Caffrey will be done with his sentence.”

Peter nodded and scrubbed at his face. “Yeah.” He sighed and looked him right in the eye. “Look – I’m sorry. For being such a disappointment. I know you didn’t expect any of this mess when you tapped me for a promotion.”

“Apology accepted. And for the record, I’d been warned – ” At Peter’s startled look, Bruce added, “not about you – your record speaks for itself – but about the potential for chaos that Neal Caffrey could bring to the table. He was one of the reasons why I wanted you out of New York. And don’t get angry at me. You know just what Caffrey’s cost you. Not just now, but since you got him his deal.”

Peter seemed to deflate, almost collapsing in on himself. “Okay, all right. And yeah – I know just what you mean about Neal and chaos. But I have no regrets, Bruce. Not for any of the decisions I’ve made. Not for getting Neal his deal, not for fighting to keep him out of prison, not for turning down the promotion. And certainly not for what’s happened over the last few weeks.”

“You’re not the type of man who would, Peter. I do understand that.”

“So, what now?”

“I have the tracker and the key. The box is at the nurses’ station – they wouldn’t let me bring it into Caffrey’s room.” Bruce picked at the yellow gown he was still wearing. “Why aren’t you in this getup?”

“I did when I first got here, but now …” Peter shrugged. Bruce had to laugh. “I guess it’s better to be on the safe side.”

They walked past Caffrey’s room and Peter stopped for a brief moment and looked like he wanted to go in. But he shook his head and continued walking back to the nurses’ station. Bruce asked for the case he’d left with them. They handed it over, and he, in turn, gave it to Peter and then fished the key to the case out of his pants pocket. “Do you want me to come back in and talk to Caffrey with you?”

“No, I think it might be best for me to tell Neal.”

“Without me hovering like a bad smell?” Bruce joked.

Peter gave him a wry smile. “Yeah, something like that.” He sighed and turned to head back to
“Peter –” Bruce stopped him. “You haven’t burned all your bridges, you know. When this is over, when Caffrey’s sentence is over – there will be a place for you in D.C. You’re one of the best agents in the Bureau.”

“Thank you, Bruce.” Peter was appreciative, but clearly unenthusiastic about his offer.

“But you’re not interested, right? Not even with Elizabeth working there?”

“No. I’m not cut out for that life. I never was and I shouldn’t have tried to make myself believe otherwise.”

Bruce looked at Peter, really looked at him. Beneath the physical weariness, he saw the depth of suffering that the last six months had taken. He wondered how much longer Peter could hold on like this.

“You apologized to me, Peter. It’s my turn to apologize to you. I should have listened to you, I should have helped you when you fought to look for Caffrey –”

“Neal. His name is Neal.”

Bruce nodded. “Neal, right. I was angry with you – for turning down the promotion, for being so insistent that Caffrey – sorry, Neal – hadn’t run. I was still angry with you when he’d been found. That anger kept me from remembering what fighting for justice was really about. Not budgets and headcount and conviction rates, but the people. The ones that we’re supposed to protect is what matters.” He shook his head. “Monday, when that cop – Benson – rattled off the list of cases where Neal had been directly in the line of fire, I was ashamed of myself. We don’t let agents do things like that, but we’ve pushed an untrained CI into harm’s way over and over again with little recognition. That says something about us, something unpleasant. When you talk to Neal, please tell him that we should have done more and that I’m sorry for everything he went through.”

Peter stared at him, and for a moment, Bruce thought he might just walk away. Instead, Peter held out his hand.

“Thank you, Bruce. That means a lot.” At that, Peter went back to Caffrey – Neal’s – room.

Bruce wondered, though, if it was going to be enough.
Sometime in Late January – Early Thursday Afternoon

Neal had been sleeping on and off for the better part of the last day. He’d doze off and wake with a start, his heart racing with anxiety. Then Peter would tell him to relax, that everything was all right, that he was safe. That was all he needed to calm down, knowing that Peter was really here, in the chair next to his bed, sleeping or reading or just watching him. That he wasn’t an illusion borne of fear and longing and drugs.

When Neal opened his eyes this time, however, his heart wasn’t racing, he wasn’t frightened. But he still looked for Peter, who wasn’t in the room. That didn’t worry him, though. Peter’s coat was on the radiator, the newspaper he’d been reading was folded and on the chair. The man was probably in the bathroom or getting a bite to eat. It was unreasonable to expect him to stay glued to his side.

At that, Neal blinked and realized that his thoughts were clearer than they had been for days. Maybe when Peter came back, they’d finally be able to talk.

He took a deep breath, carefully filling his lungs. They ached, but he could breathe; it didn’t feel like he was drowning or being stabbed.

Before Peter came back, a nurse came in to check his vitals. “How are you feeling today?”

“Better. A lot better.” He took another deep breath.

“Breathing is easier?” She strapped a cuff around his arm and he tried not to wince as she pumped it so full that his hand went numb. Neal could actually hear and feel his blood pulsing until she released the pressure.

“One-ten over sixty-five, that’s pretty good.” She held his wrist and looked at her watch. “Heart rate’s fifty-five. Mr. Caffrey – I’d say you’re on the road to recovery.”

Neal felt himself smiling, muscles stretching into a long-forgotten shape. The nurse poked a thermometer in his ear and a few seconds later pronounced him fever free. She changed the bag on his IV, checked the bandages from his surgery and then the point where the tube was stuck in him. The bag collecting fluid from his lung was almost empty.

“That’s a good sign – I bet they’ll spring you soon. Maybe even tomorrow. You’ll finally get to go home.”

Neal’s stomach flipped a bit. *Home.*

The nurse pulled the blanket up and asked him if he needed anything for the pain.

“No, I’m pretty good.”

“Okay. I’m going off shift soon, Dmitria will be taking over. She’s not a soft touch like I am, just so you know.”

Neal chuckled and it didn’t even hurt.

The nurse headed for the door, then paused and said, “I think your friend is back.”
Sure enough, the door opened and Peter was there. Neal’s smile broadened, the expression feeling natural for the first time since – forever.

Peter took possession of the chair again, dropping the newspaper into the garbage. He was holding a small aluminum case. Neal had seen one like that before, on that terrible night when Peter had come to his apartment after he’d stolen the Welsh gold. It had contained a new tracker. Back then, Neal had steeled himself against the anger, the sick feeling that he was forever going to be a dog on a leash. Now – he found himself longing for that leash, especially if Peter was the one holding the other end. As long as Peter was there, he was safe.

But Peter just set the case down on the floor and looked at him with a curious expression. “How are you feeling?”

“Believe it or not, a lot better. I can breathe.” He demonstrated. And coughed.

“I can tell.”

Neal struggled and caught his breath, cleared his throat and tried again. This time, he inhaled deeply and slowly exhaled without coughing or choking. “See?”

Peter laughed, a short but happy sound. “Good. You’re making progress.”

“What’s in the box?” Neal couldn’t help but ask.

“Nothing important. Just something I need to take home.”

Despite everything he’d been through, he could still read Peter like a book. Peter was lying. Whatever was in that case was important and Neal couldn’t shake the feeling it contained a new tracker. He didn’t press the issue, though. He had other questions. More important ones. “Have you and Elizabeth separated?”

Peter’s mask was firmly in place. “Why do you ask that?”

That reaction wasn’t what he’d expected. He was certain that Peter would instantly deny the question, that he’d reassure him that all was well between him and his beloved wife. “Because you’re here in New York, Elizabeth is working in D.C. And Elizabeth seemed so very unhappy when I saw her on Sunday.”

Such a wave of sadness crossed Peter’s face that Neal instantly regretted his question. “I’m sorry – it’s none of my business.”

Peter didn’t deny that, either. But he opened and closed his mouth once, twice – as if he couldn’t find the right words. Finally he did answer. “El and I are going to be fine. She comes back to New York or I go down to D.C. on the weekends - we see each other as often as we can manage. We just need to settle into the routine a bit better.”

Neal didn’t believe a word of that, and he didn’t like the way Peter’s lies were stacking up. “I don’t understand why you didn’t go to D.C. – you were so looking forward to the promotion.”

Peter sighed. “I think I did a good job of convincing myself I wanted it.”

“Or that you wanted to get out of New York and all the headaches.”

Peter gave him a look, one he’d been on the receiving end of for over three years. It made Neal happy in so many ways. But that look wasn’t the answer he needed. “Come on, Peter, why didn’t
“When you stormed off, I was so – ” Peter sighed. “So sick and angry and disappointed. I had reconciled myself to a desk job, but when I realized that I’d be part of a system that had little connection to what went on in the field, a system that had no qualms about keeping you chained up because you were too valuable to let go, I couldn’t take that promotion.”

Even though his tone was casual, there was so much anger in Peter’s answer that the hair on the back of Neal’s neck stood up. “Peter – I’m sorry.”

Peter’s words echoed the ones he’d said to Elizabeth a few days ago. “No, Neal – you have nothing to be sorry about. While their refusal to release you opened my eyes, it was still my decision to stay here. I couldn’t live with what I’d have become if I had gone to D.C.”

But Neal couldn’t let it go. “Even though you and El are living in different cities?”

“The job at the National Gallery was too good of an opportunity for her to pass up.”

“But still…”

“It’s fine, Neal. We’ll be fine.”

“But you’re not, now. And it’s my fault.”

This time, Peter’s denial was swift and absolute. “No! Absolutely not – why would you even think that?”

Neal shrugged. It was hard to explain, but the feeling was inescapable. “Elizabeth said that she’d thought I’d run, but that you hadn’t.”

“No, I never did.”

“No?”

Peter shook his head. “No. Not for a second. You promised me you were going straight. If you tell me you’re going to do something, you do it. You don’t lie to me, Neal.”

“Not unless your wife asks me to.” Neal gave Peter a hopeful smile.

That got the reaction he’d been hoping for. Peter smiled back and said, “Yeah.”

“I was thinking about it, though.”

“What?”

“Running. That day – after I’d left your house. I was so furious.” Neal decided that there was no need to hold back anymore. “I asked Moz to work on blocking the signal for the new tracker.”

“Like he did with the old one? When you stole the Welsh gold?”

Neal nodded, relieved that there was no heat or anger in Peter’s reply.

Then Peter dropped a bombshell. “I know that Hagen was behind that, Neal. That he and Rachel Turner had manipulated you into stealing the gold to pay off Dawson.”
“Ah.” After Rachel had been captured the first time, after he’d gotten the copy of the recording of him stealing the gold, he and Peter had never talked about it. They’d cleaned out the evidence in her apartment, boxed it up without really looking at it, and found their own version of “normal” again. Like so much of their problems, it was easier to ignore and pretend to forget than to actually talk about what happened.

“We were both set up. If I hadn’t been arrested for shooting Terrance Pratt, it would have been something else. I had combed through Rachel’s files after you’d disappeared, I thought she might have been involved.”

Neal swallowed, feeling slightly sick to his stomach. “What did you find?”

“A lot – and nothing. She and Hagen had this in the works for months before your father showed up. There were notes about corruption schemes, witness-tampering, pay-offs.” And then Peter chuckled.

“What’s so funny?” Neal couldn’t imagine anything amusing about Hagen and Rachel’s schemes to destroy their lives.

“One of the plans that they’d considered.” Peter laughed again and there was something very sweet about his smile, but he didn’t continue.

“Come on, tell me. I’m a sick man and the suspense might hurt me.”

At that, Peter gave a bark of laugh. “Okay, okay. Remember Jack Franklin and Rebecca Vitale?”

Neal blinked at the apparent non sequitur. “Huh? What do those two have to do with Hagen and Rachel?”

Peter just lifted an eyebrow at him and the light dawned. “Oh. Oh. Oh.” He looked at Peter again. “Us?”

Peter nodded and Neal was surprised by the light flush on his cheeks. And the heat in his own. Once upon a time, he’d considered trying to seduce Peter, but that was before he’d gotten to know the man and his complete devotion to Elizabeth. The devil was on his tongue, however, and he couldn’t keep from asking, “Why didn’t they go through with that one?”

“Hagen thought you’d be willing to play me – to use me to get privileges and to manipulate the system, but Rachel was convinced that you were unlikely to have a relationship with a man, no matter what was at stake – that you’d be more likely to try to seduce Elizabeth. Her notes on that were a little … bizarre. It seemed like she was already infatuated with you.”

“Really – me and Elizabeth. Tell me you have to be kidding.”

“I’m not. Not that you’d have had a snowball’s chance…” Peter chuckled again, and Neal laughed too.

“True.”

“Anyway – ” Peter changed the subject. “They would have snared us with something. They were determined to get you to steal that chapter of the Mosconi Codex. My arrest and Andrew Dawson’s gambling habits played right into their hands. You were set up.”

“I don’t like the idea that I could be so easily manipulated.” Neal leaned back and stared up at the ceiling, remembering one of the most hurtful moments of his life – at least before he’d been kidnapped. “But you’d called it. I’m a criminal and why shouldn’t anyone expect me to do anything
but think and act like a criminal?"

“Neal – no. I didn’t mean that. I was angry, and I didn’t know what was going on.”

Neal closed his eyes. This was getting to be too much. “If I wasn’t a criminal, Peter, if I wasn’t who I am, none of this would have ever happened.” He lifted the hand with the IV attached and touched the bandage covering up the wounds on his throat to illustrate his point.

Peter got up, lowered the rail on the side of his bed, and did something that Neal had been longing for almost since the moment he’d woken up. Peter gathered him into his arms and gently, carefully hugged him. Memories cascaded though him, good ones and bad – Peter’s arms around him, holding him back from the fireball, the moment when they’d found him free and safe after he’d been kidnapped, that moment in the FBI offices – before everything turned to shit. And of course, that bright afternoon on top of a stone tower on a small island in the Atlantic Ocean.

He sank into that embrace, holding Peter tight and trying not to cry. But he couldn’t stop the tears. He couldn’t stop the sobbing, and despite the ache from his wounded lung, the old bruising, the release felt good. He held onto Peter and let the tide carry him out to sea.
Sometime in Late January – Thursday Afternoon

Peter held onto Neal, held him as he cried. He held him and wished like hell that they could be anyplace but in a hospital room. Neal was so thin, his body wasted from the months of captivity, his tears were soaking through his shirt, his body shaking from the release of so much pain.

He held onto Neal and cursed himself, cursed his stupidity and his guilt. Nothing should have kept him from his friend.

The storm passed and Neal stopped shaking, mostly. But Peter held him and remembered all the good times, their friendship, the man he used to be. The man he still wanted to be.

Neal stilled in his arms, resting his head on his shoulder before taking a deep, shuddering breath. Peter could feel him wince and a cough start. He eased Neal out of his arms and rubbed at his back and shoulders, trying not to notice the way the bones protruded through his skin. He kept up the gentle caress until Neal eased himself back against the mattress.

“Sorry.”

“Stop apologizing.”

“I’m a mess.” Neal blinked up at him, his eyes wary and expression guarded.

“Yeah.” Peter wasn’t sure what other answer would be required.

“What’s going to happen to me?”

“You’re not going back to prison.”

“For now – but …”

“No buts. You’re not going back – I have received … assurances.” Peter wasn’t sure that Neal was ready for the details. “The assholes from Treasury, the Marshals, hell – even the FBI – can throw all the tantrums they want. You’re not going back there.”

Neal looked like he didn’t believe him and the last thing that Peter wanted was for Neal to worry.

“Remember my boss?”

Neal nodded. “Bruce, right? He came in when the Treasury agents were interviewing me. What day was that? Saturday?”

“He was just here and he said, categorically, that you will not be going back to prison. He was told by senior members of the Justice Department.” Peter didn’t tell Neal about Landon – there was no need for him to know about the deal he had made with the devil. Her fingerprints were all over this and if she’d asked him to tithe his salary to RAINN instead of a single payment, he would have done so – just for this.

Neal finally seemed to believe him and Peter waited for the next question – whether the FBI still held the pawn ticket on his soul. But whatever Neal was or was not going to ask was cut short by a knock on the door.
“Excuse me, Mr. Neal Caffrey?”

The questioner, a doctor by her long white coat, looked from him to Neal, and Peter was struck by the amusing, albeit unrealistic thought that she wasn’t sure who the patient was.

Neal seemed to share the joke and he raised his hand. “I think that’s me.”

The doctor laughed, as if she also realized the humor in her question. “Sorry, I’m Doctor Reissenger, from Psychiatric Services.”

“Ah – you’re here to make sure I’m not crazy.”

Neal was smiling and joking, but Peter could tell just how nervous Neal was.

“Something like that.” The doctor was still smiling but her tone was serious. She turned to him. “You are?”

“Peter Burke, Neal’s friend.” Peter held out his hand.

She took it and gave him a curious stare, one that made him wonder if he was somehow in her file. “I’m afraid that I need to talk with Mr. Caffrey alone.”

He understood. He didn’t like it, but he understood. “Can you give us a few minutes?”

The doctor nodded and stepped out of the room.

“Neal – Peter couldn’t forget Neal’s session with the doctor who’d drugged and used her patients to commit serious felonies.

“I’m okay, Peter. Really.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah, I am. Look – you should go home, get some sleep. Who’s taking care of Satchmo?”

Peter had to laugh. “Of all the things, that’s what you’re worried about?”

“Hey – Satchmo’s important, too.”

“Yes, he is – and I’ve got a regular dog walker who comes in during the week. Nothing to be concerned about.”

“You probably could use your own bed. You look like crap.”

“Hey, thanks a lot.” Peter tried not to get choked up. This easy banter between them seemed so … normal.

“Peter …”

“Okay, okay – I’m going.” He put on his coat, picked up the case with the new tracker, took a deep breath and smiled. “I’ll be back later – so behave.”

Neal stared at the case with an odd, almost longing expression before he smiled back and held out his hand. Peter took it, nodding once, twice before letting go without a word.

He sighed in weary disgust as he walked out of the hospital. Of course it was snowing, or more
accurately a combination of icy sleet and heavy wet flakes. The cold air cleared his head and instead of going home, he headed back to the office.

He was, for the moment, still an FBI agent.

The psychiatrist was very, for want of a better term, gentle with him, but her agenda was clear. Was he suicidal or otherwise going to be inclined to be a danger to himself or to others?

They talked and Neal did his best to answer honestly – a unique experiment on his part. Back when he’d been shipped off to Sing-Sing, he’d had a few sessions with the prison shrinks – he knew how to play them, and they responded like a Stradivarius in the hands of a maestro. He got a private cell, better food, better library and workshop privileges, and all the other things he needed to stay alive and sane.

Then there was Doctor Summers, the psychiatrist who had fucked with him so hard, it took six months of steady torture to get her out of his head.

But this shrink wasn’t like those other doctors. She didn’t pretend that he was anything more than an interesting chart in a pile of charts. And there was nothing to be gained by manipulating her for sympathy.

“Your friend, the man who was just here – can you tell me about him?”

“Why?”

She shrugged. “Why not? He seemed important to you, you seem important to him.”

“He’s one of my closest friends. Someone I trust.”

“You’ve known each other a long time?”

Neal sighed. If it meant getting out of here, he’d give her the whole story. “Hope you don’t have another appointment anytime soon. Because this is going to take a while.”

The doctor smiled. “I’m all ears.”

Neal told her most of everything. Well, not anything that would implicate him in any legally questionable activities, but about how Peter caught him, how he conned Peter into getting him out of prison, how Peter turned the tables on him and put him on a leash for almost four years.

“So, doc – do I have Stockholm Syndrome? Am I just another clichéd version on Patty Hearst?”

“Why do you ask that, Mr. Caffrey?”

“Doesn’t it seem strange that I’ve become such good friends with the man who put me behind bars? The man who’s kept me chained up for over three years.” He laughed lightly.

The shrink didn’t seem to find that amusing. “Are you angry at Peter?”

“No, of course not. Why would you say that?”

The doctor tapped her pen against her lips. “Because I find your terminology interesting. You were held captive for six months, you suffered unspeakable horrors, and yet – when you talk about someone who you’ve referred to as one of your closest friends, someone you say has saved your life,
you call him your ‘captor’.”

Neal clenched his fists, ignoring the stinging pain in the hand with the IV. “I was joking. Peter is not my captor.” He tried to control the anger in his voice.

The doctor flipped back through her notes. “Yet you said, and I quote ‘The man who’s kept me chained up.’ Under different circumstances, I’d think you were being playful, or trying to misdirect. But given the reasons why you’re here, why I’m here – I’m drawing a different conclusion.”

“I’m not angry at Peter.” And yet, as the words left his mouth, Neal could hear an echo of other words, words he might have spoken. “This is your fault – you did this to me. You did this, you bastard. You forgot about me and left me to die.”

“Mr. Caffrey? Are you okay?”

The doctor reached out and touched his hand, and Neal flinched.

“What’s the matter?”

“Nothing, nothing.” Neal shook his head, trying to dispel the not-memory. “Look – I’m kind of beat. Do you have any other questions?”

Doctor Reissinger gave him a vague smile. “No, I think we’re good here. You’ve been very forthcoming, Mr. Caffrey. That’s important.”

Neal summoned up a smile. “Will I be able to get out of here soon – or am I going to be consigned to a padded cell?” He wasn’t sure which answer he wanted. There was some security to be had with a clean, quiet room where no one would hurt him.

Of course, the she gave him a deliberately vague answer. “I’ll make my report tomorrow, but you’ll be fine.”

The doctor left and Neal was alone. He stared at the ceiling and tried not to hear words he hoped he’d never said.

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Wet, cold, exhausted and not quite certain that coming back to the office was the best course of action, Peter was pleased to find a friendly face in the lobby of the FBI building.

“Hey, Di.” He shook out his coat and narrowly avoided getting her wet.

“Hey, yourself.” Diana’s smile was tinged with concern.

Peter could see the questions in her eyes. Where have you been? Have you seen Neal?

But she didn’t ask those questions. “Did Section Chief McKinsey get a hold of you? He was in the office early this morning, looking for you.” She spotted the aluminum case he was carrying. “Ah, I guess he did.”

“I met with him at the hospital.”

Diana gave him a broad, bright smile. “Then you’ve finally been to see Neal.”

“Yeah.” Peter took a deep breath and continued. “You were right, everyone was right. I needed to go see him. Regardless of what I’m feeling, he needed me.” Despite the hours spent at Neal’s
bedside, the talk they’d had, even the news from Bruce, Peter still couldn’t shake the feeling that he was, ultimately, responsible for what happened to Neal. But that was his problem. Not Neal’s. He’d have to work on it.

Work. Which reminded him that, for the foreseeable future, he still had a job to do. “I’m sorry about going AWOL – what’s been happening?”

The elevator arrived and Diana filled him in on her active caseload. “Nothing critical. Some new case files hit your desk and your admin passed them onto Clinton for an initial review. I’ve been out interviewing witnesses on the Moretti fraud, and Price and Callahan are chasing down leads on that SBA bid-rigging scheme. Everyone else is hard at work, playing Minecraft or Angry Birds.”

Peter laughed. Diana’s dry humor was a tonic for his soul. “Good to hear that everything’s going smoothly.” Last night, he’d left a message with his admin, Andrea, that he’d be out of the office, but he hadn’t given her any other information.

“Yeah. Everything’s good.”

The elevator arrived at the twenty-first floor and they got out and headed into the office.

Diana went to her desk and Peter went up to his office. Andrea gave him a dirty look and dumped a stack of forms and files on his desk. Peter considered apologizing, but he was distracted by some movement in the bullpen. Diana and Clinton had gotten up from their desks and the guard, Allen, was escorting a very familiar someone through the office.

Sergeant Olivia Benson.

Peter waved off Andrea and went out to the balcony. Olivia looked up and smiled at him. He felt his lips curve into an answering grin, and filled with a lot more energy than he’d had in a week, he bounded down the stairs. “You have news?”

Olivia nodded. “We got them.”

Diana asked, “The bastards who took Neal?”

“Yes – and we have an admission on record. The man who snatched Neal couldn’t resist bragging after the deal was completed. He told Mozzie – ”

Clinton cut her off. “Moz – the little guy? Neal’s friend? He was part of your operation?”

Olivia nodded. “Him and your former colleague, Reese Hughes – they played the buyers.”

“Seriously, Mozzie and Agent Hughes?”

“They worked quite well together – they had this whole shtick going how they were twin brothers.”

Peter blinked, not quite believing his ears. Clinton and Diana burst out in laughter at the improbability of it.

He wanted details about the arrest – the funny bits could be saved for another time. “The guys who took Neal confessed?”

Olivia made a face. “Like I said, the younger guy – the one Neal called ‘Cowboy Boots’ – bragged to Mozzie that he’d snatched Neal and oversaw his …” She sighed at the word, “torture.” But that was before we made the arrests. Neither him nor his partner have said a word once we put the cuffs
“That won’t make a difference.” Diana spoke with the assurance of an experienced agent of the law.

“No – but it’s a puzzle we’ll sort out.”

“Have you been to see Neal yet?”

“No – I wanted to tell you first, and then maybe we could go deliver the news together.” She looked at him and Peter could read the concern in her eyes. She’d been witness to Neal’s bitter, drug-induced accusations. She knew he’d been reluctant to see Neal after that.

“I just got back from the hospital – Neal was starting a session with a shrink. But we can go see him. Just give me a few minutes to wrap up some things, okay?”

Peter left Olivia with Clinton and Diana. He took his time, signing off on the stack of files and forms that Andrea had left for him. From his office, he watched the three of them talking, which quickly became almost every agent and staff member in the office, and it was clear that Olivia was describing the take-down. This was good. The moral in the office had suffered when Neal had disappeared, and as the weeks and months passed, it had gotten steadily worse. Peter couldn’t deny that his own behavior had been a big contributor.

Everyone had been worried about Neal and relieved when he’d been found alive, despite his terrible condition. Hearing that the people who’d hurt him had been caught and arrested was the best possible news.

Peter continued to watch and gradually, the staff began to drift back to their desks. Olivia looked up and Peter nodded. It was time to head back to the hospital.
Sometime in Late January – Early Thursday Evening

Elizabeth tried not to be annoyed that Mozzie and not her husband was once again the bearer of important news. And how could she be annoyed, when the news was so good?

“Let me get this straight, you and Reese Hughes went undercover as brothers to catch the people who kidnapped Neal?”

“Yes, Mrs. Suit, that’s exactly what we did. And might I add, as twins.” Mozzie sounded triumphant, but there was something else there – a thread of anger, of grief.

“What happened?”

Moz didn’t answer right away.

“Mozzie?”

“The bastard bragged about what he did to Neal.” Moz was breathing heavily, as if he could barely control his emotions.

“Oh, sweetie.” She couldn’t think of anything else to say.

“You know what this means, right?”

“No, I don’t.” El closed her eyes and tried to think. “Wait, wait… This means that there’s no chance that Neal will be sent back to prison.”

Moz’s satisfaction was tinged with something dark, like bloodlust. “Yes. I would have killed that cowboy boot-wearing son of a bitch with my bare hands but there’s still some value to his life.”

“Mozzie!” El wasn’t shocked; she remembered just how protective he was about people he cared about. She changed the subject, sort of. “Was Peter there?”

“No – this was all about the boys, or make that the girls, in blue. I don’t even know if the Suit was aware that this was going down. The Old Gray Suit might have told him, but I didn’t.”

El felt better. If Peter didn’t know, then he hadn’t broken his promise to tell her what was going on. “I’ll be home tomorrow night.” She wondered just how much longer she’d be able to do this – live a two-city life. The job at the National Gallery was a dream come true, but it was also starting to feel like a selfish indulgence.

Mozzie was pissed. Out of the goodness of his heart, he’d stopped by his erstwhile “brother’s” apartment to see if he wanted to go to the hospital and tell Neal about last night’s success, but The Old Gray Suit stopped him. Physically.

“This is such an abuse of power!” He twisted against the old man’s hold, breaking loose only to find the exit blocked. “I demand my freedom!”

“Put a sock in it.” Hughes gave him a little shove and Moz found himself sitting in an all-too-comfortable chair.
“How long are you going to keep me here?”

“Just long enough to allow Benson to do her job before you can blab to Neal.”

“I don’t blab!” Moz was outraged at the very suggestion. He just wanted to be the one to share the news.

“Here.” Hughes handed him a glass, filled with something that came out of a bottle of twelve year old Macallan. Moz took the glass but didn’t drink – at least not until Hughes took one for himself and sipped. Even then, Moz was reluctant. It was likely that the glass itself or even the entire bottle was poisoned and the Old Gray Suit was likely immune to whatever he’d used.

“This isn’t The Princess Bride.”

“Huh?” The hair on the back of Moz's neck stood up. He wondered if the old man could read minds.

“They teach mind reading in Spook School, you know.” Hughes’ lips twitched, and despite his paranoia, Moz could see the humor in the situation. He took a sip from the glass and sighed in pleasure. There was a reason why twelve year old Macallan was so damn expensive. He’d have to think of a way to liberate the rest of the bottle.

“We did good work.”

Moz had to agree.

“We make a good team.”

“That we do.”

“I was wondering if you’d crack under the stress.”

“I’m like case-hardened blued steel.” Moz took another sip.

“That doesn’t even make sense.”

He chuckled. “No, it doesn’t. Consider me the Hope Diamond. No – wait. That’s an unfortunate analogy.”

“It is.” Hughes sat down across from him. “Ever consider using your talents in more … approved ways?”

“Huh?” Moz blinked, not sure he was hearing what he was hearing. “Are you trying to … recruit me?”

“Maybe. Have you ever actively worked against the interests of the U.S. Government?”

“Umm…” Moz thought for a few moments. “Does casing a certain vault in Lower Manhattan count?”

Hughes raised just one of those formidable eyebrows at him. “You were thinking of robbing the Federal Reserve?”

“It was a passing thought…” Moz finished the contents of the tumbler and held it out to Hughes for a refill.

“Glad it was just a thought.”
“I wouldn’t be an employee…” He couldn’t believe he was giving this offer serious consideration.

“No – a contractor.” Somehow, I don’t think you’d pass the psych evaluation.” Hughes refilled the glass, making it a double this time.

“Are you impugning my mental stability?” Moz tried for outrage.

Hughes stared at him over the rim of his own glass and said simply, “Yes.”

Moz toasted the other man. “Fair enough. And I always appreciate honesty, which is the only reason why I’ll consider your offer.”

“Good.”

Moz pretended to immerse himself in the Macallan and scoped out the surroundings while the Uber-Suit responded to a text. Lots of dark wood, but tasteful. Suitable for a former Suit and not-so-former Spook. He wondered if the sideboard was genuine Eastlake.

“You want to go over to the hospital now?” Hughes interrupted his mildly felonious musings.

“Now?”

“Just got a text from Peter, he and Benson are on their way over to talk with Neal. I was thinking about heading to the hospital, too. You’re welcome to join me.”

Moz drained the rest of the scotch and set the glass down with an emphatic thump. He was a little unsteady when he got to his feet and wondered if it was just exhaustion or maybe there really was something in the drink. Regardless, he gestured for the Old Gray Suit to lead the way. “Well, then, what are we waiting for?”

Shortly after the shrink finished with him, a nurse came and changed his bandages, checked his IV lines, asked him to rate his physical pain, and finally left. He kept replaying the last exchange with Dr. Reissinger – his bizarre description of Peter as his captor and her curiosity and concern over that word.

Alone with his thoughts, he had to admit that calling Peter his best friend and then saying that Peter kept him “chained up” was a strange dichotomy. But both descriptions were true. Peter was the one who kept him on the anklet, who chased after him every damn time he even thought about running. And yet, he’d once told Peter, albeit under the influence of some powerful drugs, that he was the only one he really trusted, and that was the absolute and unconditional truth.

He might be closer to Moz, but Moz was far too self-interested, too invested in his own view of the world, to not sell him out if he thought it was the best course of action. And as much as he loved Moz, and as much as he knew that Moz cared for him, how much he valued their friendship, Neal wasn’t all that sure that Moz would take a bullet meant for him.

Peter would. And he’d do the same for Peter.

But Peter was also the one who caught him, who was relentless in his pursuit of “justice,” and who kept dragging him back.

No, that wasn’t right. Peter loved him like family; he was the closest person Neal had to someone who loved him, despite his faults. Neal closed his eyes and fought against the memories.
“You’re a criminal, and that’s all you’ll ever be.” He could hear those words as if they were spoken just seconds ago. He had heard them in his head every time those faceless bastards came after him with their fists and their whips and used his body like a dirty rag. And then other words started to echo in his brain, words that sounded like they came out of his own mouth. “This is your fault – you did this to me. You did this, you bastard. You forgot about me and left me to die”

No. No. He didn’t believe that. He couldn’t think that Peter had left him to suffer because he was nothing more than a criminal. No.

“Neal?”

He opened his eyes and Peter was there. This all felt too familiar.

“What’s wrong?”

“Wrong?” Neal was confused.

“You’re crying. Are you in pain? Did something happen?”

Neal wiped at his face and his fingers came away wet. “No – not in pain. I – I was just…” He couldn’t bring himself to articulate what he was feeling, what terrible thoughts had been chasing around his brain.

“Did the shrink do a number on you? Did she mess with your head?” Peter’s voice was gentle, but he could detect a note of steely anger there.

“She asked a lot of questions, but I’m okay.” He pressed the button to lift the head of the bed, so he could at least talk to Peter face to face. He was surprised to see that Peter wasn’t alone. Sergeant Benson was standing at his shoulder. “What’s going on?”

Benson’s stern face relaxed into a smile. “We’ve made arrests, Neal. We have a recorded confession. We’ve got the men who kidnapped you and they’re going to prison.”

Her words were simple, straightforward, and to the point. But Neal wasn’t sure he heard them correctly. “What?”

“We’ve got them. The ones you called The Slav and Cowboy Boots. They’re in custody and probably on their way to arraignment right now.”

“How?” He still wasn’t sure he believed what he was hearing.

“Your friends – Mozzie and Mr. Hughes – helped. I’m sure they’ll want to tell you the story in all the glorious detail.”

“They confessed?” He had to ask because he still wasn’t sure he believed what he was hearing.

“Yes – Cowboy Boots … ” Benson frowned and paused. “He bragged about grabbing you, about torturing you, about breaking you to get your compliance. About killing you.”

Neal took a deep breath and as he exhaled, the vague sense of dread that had been dogging him since he woke in this hospital bed eased.

“I’m going to head back to the station, okay? But if you need anything, call me.” Benson left her card on the nightstand, nodded to Peter and left.

“I guess the nightmare’s over.” Neal spoke and hoped those words were true. Peter loomed over
him, still tense, worry etched deep in his face.

“You’ll probably have to testify.”

“I can do that.”

Peter didn’t say anything, and Neal was getting a little unnerved. He wondered if Peter knew what dark thoughts had been chasing around his brain before he’d arrived. “Are you going to just stand there and stare at me? Do I have something on my nose?” Neal made a show of scrubbing at it, but Peter just stood there, hands shoved into his coat pocket. He didn’t even crack a smile. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.”

“Then sit, please. You’re making me nervous.”

That got a reaction. Peter looked like he was forcing himself to relax. He grabbed the chair he’d spent last night in and sat.

“Is there a problem? Has your boss come back with bad news?”

“No – no. Nothing’s wrong. And with the confession on record, there’s no way you’d be sent back to prison.”

“Then what’s going on, Peter?” He thought they’d sorted everything out yesterday, this morning. They’d finally talked. He was still working things out in his head, but that had nothing to do with Peter’s weird mood.

“Nothing – really. Just …” Peter reached out and took his hand and Neal immediately felt better.

“It’s hard to believe, isn’t it?”

“That they caught them, yeah. It does feel a little surreal.”

They sat quietly for a few minutes and Neal felt at peace. He was safe, his future a lot less cloudy than it had been even with Peter’s earlier assurances that he wasn’t going back to prison. And most important of all, Peter was here. He could face whatever he had to knowing that.

“So, Moz and Hughes… undercover ‘brothers’. Kind of hard to imagine.”

“Yeah – I know. Like that movie – the one with Arnold Schwarzenegger and Danny DeVito.”

“Agent Hughes – ” Neal couldn’t break the habit of using the man’s title, although he was retired, “has been very supportive.”

“You seem surprised.”

“I am – I guess. The last conversation we had - the day he’d ‘retired’, he called me a ‘son of a bitch’ and he wasn’t casting aspersions on my mother.”

“I’m pretty sure he said that as a gesture of respect.”

“He was – but I’m still not sure why he’s been my advocate.”

“Because he never believed you ran. As much as I was looking for you, so was Reese. He has … contacts.”
Peter didn’t elaborate and Neal didn’t ask. He’d long suspected that Reese Hughes was a hell of a lot more than an FBI agent. He’d kept those suspicions to himself, but it pleased him to see that he was right. “But Moz? I really can’t imagine the two of them cooperating. Mr. Paranoia himself and a Super Suit?”

Peter chuckled. “I think Moz has been calling him the ‘Old Gray Suit’ but I suspect that Reese would prefer your nickname.”

There was a faint buzzing sound from Peter’s suit jacket, but he made no move to look at it.

“That could be important, you know.”

Peter shrugged and still didn’t pull his phone out. He ignored the second buzz and the third one.

“Come on, Peter – aren’t you going to answer it?”

Peter grimaced in response and finally reached into his jacket pocket and took out his FBI-issued phone. Whatever the texts were, they didn’t elicit any reaction from his friend, who put the phone away without responding.

But Neal’s curiosity was piqued. “What’s going on?”

“Nothing.” Peter gave him a half-smile, but Neal didn’t buy it.

“Nothing? Really?”

“Yes, really – and sometimes the world doesn’t revolve around Neal Caffrey – only sometimes. Occasionally. Rarely. But it does happen.”

“Okay, but I’m still curious.” Neal leaned back against the pillows, shifting uncomfortably as the movement pulled at the healing skin on his back and at the surgery sites on his belly and chest. He’d insisted on eliminating all of the pain-killers except ibuprofen, and they’d only let him take that twice a day.

“Are you all right?” Peter must have noticed his discomfort.

“Yeah – just healing. I’m getting better.” Neal hoped Peter wouldn’t start hovering. He didn’t want a nanny, but he also didn’t want Peter to leave.

“Good.” Peter leaned back against the chair, but from what Neal could read on his face, he wasn’t relaxing. He seemed almost expectant.

“Have you gone home yet?”

“I will, in a little while.”

“You don’t have to sit with me, you know.” He could tell just how exhausted he was.

“I know – I also know that I should have been here days ago.” Peter sighed. “I can’t undo what I did – or didn’t – do. But I can be here now.”

“For a little while longer, okay?”

Peter gave him that wry grin – the one that had sealed their friendship so long ago. “For a little while.”
Peter was a restful companion – unlike Moz, who seemed to either need to entertain him or needed to be entertained. But Moz hadn’t been around for the past few days, for good reason. Neal loved the little guy – he was a brother, a father, a partner in crime. Moz could always be counted on to explore and exploit Neal’s own id, but Moz wasn’t the protective sort. At least not until things turned dark and deadly. He remembered the hit Moz had taken out on Matthew Keller after Keller murdered Hale.

Moz had loved the old man like a father.

But Neal had never figured that he’d ever be the focus of that degree of protective concern. Moz might not have taken a hit out on the men who’d kidnapped him, but what he’d done was even more extraordinary. He had worked with the FBI and the NYPD. And without Neal’s prodding or his promise of an expensive bottle of wine at the end of the day.

“You’re smiling,” Peter commented.

“Yeah. Just thinking about Moz working with so many Suits.”

“He’ll do anything for the people he loves. Even that.”

“Mmm, yeah.”

The conversation sank back into comfortable silence until it was broken by a sharp rap on the door frame. In iambic pentameter.

“Anybody home?”

Neal was surprised that Mozzie didn’t just burst into the room with some outrageous non sequitur. It might have been exhaustion, respect for his condition, or the rather stolid presence of Reese Hughes hovering over his shoulder.

“Hey there.” Neal found the controls that adjusted the bed, raising him into a full sitting position. “I understand you’re the hero of the hour.” He caught Hughes’ eye and they shared a small, private smile.

Moz, to his surprise, perched himself on the edge of the bed and just stared at him. “You okay?”

Neal nodded. “I’m getting better all the time.”

“Good.” Moz looked over at Peter. “Glad to see you finally decided to visit, Suit.”

Peter snorted and didn’t respond directly. “I am guessing that you’ve already spoken with my wife.”

Mozzie was surprisingly gentle in his reply. “You might want to give her a call. She’s been a little … worried.”

“I will.”

Neal was shocked by the suddenly bleak expression on Peter’s face, remembering his earlier deflection when he’d asked if he and Elizabeth were separated. There was definitely trouble between them and Neal couldn’t escape the feeling that he’d somehow been the cause of their problems.

“Peter -”

Peter turned from staring down Mozzie to looking at him, his expression softening. “What?”
“You need to go home.” Neal really didn’t want to send Peter away. He had the horrible and altogether ridiculous feeling that Peter might not come back. But Peter was exhausted and it wasn’t fair to keep him here.

Peter looked from him to Moz and then to Hughes, who was standing by the door, and then back to him again. “Okay. Should let you get some rest.” Peter paused, bit his lip, and pulled out his personal cell phone and handed it to him. “I’ll get you a new phone tomorrow, but in the meantime, if you need anything, call me.”

“Suit, keep yours. He can have mine.” Mozzie pulled out his own phone – or at least one of his own phones – and gave it to Neal.

Neal looked at the two phones and wasn’t sure what to do. “Um...” He looked up and caught Hughes’ eye.

The man let out a dry laugh. “Caffrey, I don’t have a spare phone for you, sorry.”

That broke the undercurrents of tension in the room. “Okay, guys – thanks.” Neal put the phones on the bedside table and yawned, wincing as the inhalation pulled at the surgical incisions and the scabs and the still-healing bruises.

“Neal, if you need anything, call me, no matter what time.”

Neal understood just what Peter was telling him. He nodded. “Get some rest, okay?” Go home, talk to Elizabeth, don’t think about me for a little while. Peter stood at his bedside, hovering indecisively. He gave Neal an all too familiar nod and said, “Good night. I’ll be in tomorrow morning.”

“Go – Peter.”

And Peter did. Hughes followed him out the door, leaving him alone with Mozzie. “So – tell me everything.”

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“Peter?”

Peter leaned against the wall, too exhausted to feel much of anything. “What?”

“You look like crap. Did you sleep here last night?”

“Yeah. Saw Bruce this afternoon. He came up from D.C.”

“What’s the matter?”

“Nothing, actually. Seems that the powers that be have decided that Neal won’t be going back to prison.”

“I should hope not – especially since we have a confession from those bastards that they kidnapped Neal.”

“This came through before that went down. I …” Peter stopped himself before telling Reese that he’d made a deal with the Devil.

Either Reese didn’t catch his aborted start of a confession, or ignored it. “McKinsey came all the way
to New York in the middle of winter to give you the good news?"

“That wasn’t the only reason for his visit.”

“Oh?”

“I’m surprised you don’t know – considering how plugged in you are, Reese.”

The older man just shook his head. “I’ve been a little busy, Peter.”

_Ah, right._ “Neal’s long-term fate is still undecided. Bruce personally delivered a new tracker.”

“Ohmm.” Reese’s disgusted expression mirrored Peter’s own feelings. “How did Caffrey take that?”

“I haven’t put it on him yet. The tracker’s still in its case, in my office. It seems – I don’t know – obscene to put it back on him here. The doctors say he might be well enough to be released in the next day or so. Maybe then.”

“Are you thinking about _not_ putting the tracker on him?”

Peter shrugged. “If the tracker isn’t activated, who will know? It’s not as if the Marshals check to see if an assigned tracker is operational.”

“They just might. Caffrey’s very high profile and not exactly a favorite with the Marshals Service.”

Peter had to agree. “But I can’t do this to him now – he’s very fragile. When I think about what those bastards did to him, and then I think about all the crap we’ve put him through – this is just wrong.”

“True.” Hughes sighed. “But your career…”

“My career is all but over. I’ve burned too many bridges the last few months. It’s only a matter of time before the axe falls. We both know that.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah. Bruce made some noises about still being welcome in D.C., but I can just imagine my reception there. And regardless, that’s not the life I want.”

“What about Elizabeth?”

“What about her?” Peter closed his eyes and tried to picture his wife, her loving smile, her strength, her fierce loyalty. But he came up blank.

Hughes let out a deep sigh and dropped the subject. “Go home, Peter. It’s late and you’re too exhausted to think straight.”

He scrubbed at his face, his stubble scratchy against his palm. “Yeah. I need some sleep.”

“If you’re smart – and I know you are – you’ll take a cab home. You’re in no shape to drive.”

Peter had to agree. “Are you coming, too?”

Hughes turned to go back to Neal’s room. “No, not quite yet. Someone needs to keep an eye on Mozzie.”

Peter had to laugh. “He starts to grow on you.”
“Yeah, like toenail fungus.”
Chapter 23

Sometime in Late January – Early Friday Morning

Her boss wasn’t happy with her. She’d been very understanding when El had told her that she needs to take off on Monday for a “family emergency” but she wasn’t quite so understanding when she’d said she needed to go back to New York on Friday, too.

Even though her boss signed off on the day’s leave, Elizabeth could hear the doubts start to creep into the woman’s voice when she’d agreed to her request– doubts about hiring someone who was trying to make a two-city marriage work, doubts about Elizabeth’s commitment to her job. She’s passed her ninety-day probationary period with flying colors, but that didn’t mean she had lifetime employment. Her job at the National Gallery gave her a unique outlet for her skills and interests, but it wasn’t one that couldn’t be filled by any one of the sharp, smart men and women who worked in her office. They were like wolves, waiting to pounce at the least sign of weakness.

Two weeks ago, she might have worried about them. But the terrible argument she’d had with Peter – the pain and the desolation and the unspoken accusations – made her reassess her priorities. It had taken her a week to come to terms with what Peter had said to her. At first, she’d told herself that Peter’s anger was unreasonable. If he needed her, he should have said something. Then Peter’s midnight call came and the attempt to heal the festering breach between them.

She’d told Peter that he needed to concentrate on Neal, to get him through this terrible ordeal. She’d tried to give him the strength he’d needed – but for what, she wasn’t sure. There was so much he hadn’t told her – the gap between the pain that poured out of him last weekend and the whole truth was like a black hole between them. Invisible to the naked eye, but there if you knew what to look for.

When she’d returned to D.C. on Monday, she tried to bury herself in her work, but she kept thinking how pointless it all was. Maybe it was time to reconsider her decision. If Neal hadn’t been kidnapped, this arrangement might have worked. But he had and his disappearance had torn at the fabric of her marriage.

El supposed if she tried to explain this to her parents, her sister or any of her friends, they’d think she was crazy. After all, Neal wasn’t family; he was just someone who forced his way into their lives. They’d tell her that she and Peter would be much better off without him.

But El knew that wasn’t true. Yes, Neal wasn’t without his issues and problems and he did introduce a certain amount of chaos – okay, a lot of chaos – into her life. But despite the chaos and drama and trauma, Neal was family. Not by blood, but in every other way. There was nothing that she’d ever asked of Neal that he hadn’t moved heaven and earth for to accomplish.

They’d never really talked about what he’d done to save Peter, she’d never thanked Neal for the sacrifice he’d made, for all the crap he’d taken from Peter because she’d asked him to save her husband and his career.

Neal was family and she owed him her loyalty. And she’d done a piss-poor job of that.

Today, El splurged for the high-speed express to New York. The train pulled out of Union Station a little before six AM and she’d be in New York by a quarter to ten. The rocking motion of the train as it sped north was lulling her to sleep. She hadn’t gotten much rest last night. Her conversation with Peter had relieved her, but made her restless, too.
“I finally went to see Neal yesterday.”

Confused, El asked, “What do you mean, ‘finally’?” Then she remembered Neal asking her where Peter was, why he hadn’t been in to see him. She hadn’t had an answer for him, but figured Peter had a good reason and would be there soon enough. When they’d talked at night and she’d asked how Neal was doing, Peter had given her very thorough progress reports, so she hadn’t even considered that he hadn’t been in to see him. The very idea seemed inconceivable.

Peter didn’t respond right away.

“Hon?”

“I couldn’t see him right away. Not until I got some things straightened out.”

El’s bullshit meter was hitting the red zone, but she decided not to say anything and disturb the fragile peace between them. “And how is Neal?”

“Doing better. The docs are saying he might even be ready for release in a day or two.”

“Good. How are you doing?”

“I’m okay.”

“You sound exhausted.”

Peter laughed. “You have no idea.”

“I spoke to Mozzie. He told me that they got the bastards who kidnapped Neal.”

“Yeah.”

“That must be a relief.”

“A big one.”

“So, no threat that they’ll send Neal back to prison now.”

“No.”

El ground her teeth. Getting answers out of Peter was like pulling teeth. “Hon, what’s the matter?”

“Nothing, really. I’m just tired. It’s been a long few days. And I haven’t been sleeping well. Everything’s just sort of catching up with me.”

This time, El wasn’t so sure that Peter was bullshitting her. She could hear his exhaustion in every syllable. “I’m coming home this weekend.”

“Really?”

That one word contained so much joy, so much happiness, that El felt herself start to cry. “Yeah, hon. I can’t wait to see you.”

“Can’t wait to see you, too. I love you so much.”

El closed her eyes against the desperation in Peter’s voice. “I love you, too. More than anything.”

El dozed and the train coasted on. At some point between BWI and Trenton, she fell into a deep,
dreamless sleep. Thankfully, a conductor woke her just as the train pulled into Newark, giving her a chance to get her bearings before arriving in New York.

Even though she was anxious to see Peter, he wasn’t expecting her. El had said nothing about coming home on Friday – she’d thought to surprise him. She had planned on just going up to the FBI office directly from Penn Station. Even though Peter hadn’t given up field work as ASAC, he was more than likely to be at his desk.

But El decided to head up to the hospital first. She couldn’t stop thinking about Neal and how badly she’d let him down.

She owed him. A lot.

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Neal was – for lack of a better word – terrified. The doctor overseeing his case had been in first thing this morning – even before his breakfast arrived. She had a big grin on her face when she’d told him that he was cleared for discharge. He smiled back because it seemed expected. She did caution him that the actual discharge process would take many hours and he shouldn’t expect to get out of this hell hole (her words) until well after two. In fact, she’d lay down good money that it would be closer to five before all of the paperwork was completed.

It was hard to explain how relieved he felt. At least he had a few more hours in this cocoon. He toyed with the cell phone Peter had left with him – the one that Moz had pushed on him was dead. He wondered who he should call. Probably June, if just to let her know that he’d been home.

Home. Now that was a word freighted with meaning. He’d given up on ever having a home again. And then he had to let out a bitter chuckle – for so long, he’d begrudged being tied to the same place, the same skyline, the same routine. He had wanted to be footloose and carefree – a man with no fixed address. Now, all he wanted was four walls, plenty of windows, and a door that only locked from the inside.

Which pretty much described his apartment at June’s, the only place he’d really ever thought of as home, despite the resentment.

But he couldn’t bring himself to call June. Or Peter. Or Mozzie. Any one of them would be delighted to take him home, to see him settled and comfortable. To get him anything he wanted, no matter how outrageous the demand (well, Peter would have his limitations, but Moz would delight in fetching the Mona Lisa for him if it would make him happy).

Neal toyed with the phone, half hoping that the battery would drain if he turned it on and off often enough. Except that it was relatively new and still had a three-quarters charge.

Call Peter.

Neal’s fingers hovered over the keypad and he’d even entered the area code and the first five digits of Peter’s FBI-issued cell phone. But he couldn’t bring himself to complete the call. And he couldn’t understand why.

“Neal?”

He looked up and, to his surprise, Elizabeth was standing in the door. She was bundled up in a winter coat and when she came into his room, she was dragging a small suitcase.

“Hey there.” Her smile was a little sad, a little tentative.
“Hey, yourself. I wasn’t expecting to see you.” Neal shifted himself forward and ignored the pain in his healing body as he reached out for her. To his delight, she came into his arms and he felt himself start to cry. She was someone he’d missed without even realizing it.

Elizabeth was crying, too. Her tears soaked through the thin hospital gown, but Neal didn’t let go. She clung to him, too. They were like two birds, tossed in a terrible storm, desperately seeking even the most meager shelter.

But like all storms, this one passed and the tears stopped. She shifted, her hands bumping up against the bandage on his side, and he hissed at the sharp pain.

Elizabeth stepped back. “Sorry.”

Neal wondered just how much that apology was supposed to encompass. “It’s okay. Really.”

“How are you doing?”

Neal tilted his head; it was less uncomfortable than shrugging. “Physically, a lot better.”

Elizabeth homed in on what he wasn’t saying. “And other than physically?”

“I’ve been better.”

“I’m not surprised. You’ve been through hell. If you said you were fine, I’d call you a liar.”

Neal had to laugh. Trust Elizabeth Burke to cut through the bullshit. “Yeah, hell is probably a good way to put it. How much did Peter tell you?”

He couldn’t help but notice how she stiffened when he mentioned her husband’s name. He reached for her hand. “Elizabeth?”

She licked her lips and grimaced. “He didn’t provide a lot of detail, but he told me enough to give me nightmares. I didn’t want to say anything when I was up last weekend - it was … difficult.”

“You didn’t really seem yourself the other day. What’s going on?” Neal knew that this was a strange thing to ask - at least under the circumstances. But it was easier to deal with someone else’s problems than his own. “You and Peter – what’s the matter with the two of you?”

Elizabeth sighed and didn’t answer.

“You don’t want to talk about it?”

She sighed again and, pulling her hand free, she drifted over to the window. “I don’t know.” She sounded so lost.

“Why not take off your coat and stay a while - they’ll be by with my very delicious lunch in a bit. I’ll be more than happy to share.”

That got a laugh out of her. “Hospital food? I should have brought you a cup of Amtrak coffee to go with it. Then we could really share the misery.” At least she did take off her coat and sat down next to him - in the chair that Peter had occupied for quite a while.

Elizabeth relaxed and the silence between them was comfortable. Earlier this morning, right after his doctor had brought the “good news,” the nurses had disconnected almost all the machinery he’d been hooked up to, everything except the intravenous infusion unit. He’d become so accustomed to the variety of beeps and pings that the lack of machine noise had been disconcerting. Now, the silence
was gently punctuated by Elizabeth’s breathing, the ping of sleet hitting the window, and his own heartbeat.

And then Elizabeth broke the peace. “Peter and I need to work some problems out.” She sighed and admitted in a lower tone, almost a whisper, “They’re big ones – I don’t know if we can.”

Neal had to ask, “How much did my disappearance cause these problems?”

“Neal –”

“Elizabeth – I need to know. I feel like it’s my fault.”

She inadvertently echoed her husband’s words to him yesterday. “You’re not the center of the universe, Neal Caffrey.” Her reply was sharp, but not enough to cut him.

“Really?” He tried for a little humor, but it fell flat. “El –” He rarely, if ever used that diminutive – it was reserved for Peter (and occasionally Mozzie). But right now, he needed to make that connection to her. She seemed so … lost. And he felt responsible.

“Are you really up to playing marriage counselor, Neal?”

Neal kept pushing. “Why are you deflecting?”

Elizabeth leaned back in the chair and looked up at the ceiling. Neal wondered what she saw. He’d had so much time looking at it that he’d actually named the stains on each of the acoustic tiles.

“It’s complicated, Neal.”

“I’m a smart guy, maybe I can help. If you let me.”

Elizabeth didn’t respond right away, but Neal could sense that she was trying to find a way to tell him what was going on. And when she did speak, Neal was stunned by her words.

“I failed Peter.”

“No! That’s not possible. The two of you -”

“Yeah, the two of us – we always seemed so flawless. The two halves of a perfect whole. We had our own language. And yeah, we fought – but we always worked through it. Peter could be an ass at times, and so could I – but the foundation was solid. Or so I thought.” Elizabeth let out a shaky breath. “I shouldn’t dump this on you.”

“If not me, then who? Have you talked with anyone?”

“No – I couldn’t. How could I admit to anyone that I failed Peter in so many ways?”

“Why do you keep saying that?”

“Because I did. I went swanning about my business, enjoying my new life in D.C., and I was deliberately blind to how much my husband needed me.”

“El – no.” He wasn’t sure what he was denying.

“Your disappearance was killing him and I didn’t want to see that. When I told you last week that I thought you’d left and I was happy you had, what I didn’t tell you was that that fractured something between Peter and me. I broke us, Neal.”
Neal opened and closed his mouth, like a gasping fish, unable to breathe despite the air. “I’m sorry, it’s all my fault.” That was the only thing he could say.

“Oh, sweetie – no, not at all. You aren’t to blame – you were kidnapped. How could you think this was your fault?”

“If I hadn’t been so good at being a criminal…”

“Neal, no – that’s just stupidity. You didn’t do this to yourself. You’re not responsible for what happened between me and Peter.”

Neal had to laugh. “You and Peter – you’re both very good at exonerating me from all the chaos I’ve brought into your lives. When Keller kidnapped you, Peter told me it wasn’t my fault. Every time that Peter lost his badge or when he landed in jail, I was told that no, it wasn’t my fault. Maybe if someone did blame me, I might have …” He shook his head and ran out of steam. “I don’t know – I might have behaved more like the man you guys thought I could be and less like the criminal I actually am.” This was a variation on what he’d said to Peter yesterday – and unlike Peter, Elizabeth didn’t pull her punches.

“If you want to blame yourself for getting kidnapped and forced to create those printing plates, if you want to be a martyr – fine. But not about this. This is my fault, Neal. Not yours.” The fury in Elizabeth’s voice left him singed.

“How can I help?”

“You can’t, Neal.” Elizabeth’s tone gentled and she took his hand, squeezing it lightly. “But – but thank you for wanting to help.”

They settled back into silence. Neal wondered if he should tell her that he was being sprung today. And decided not to.

Maybe if he didn’t say anything, it wouldn’t happen.
Chapter 24

Sometime in Late January – Friday Afternoon

Peter hung up the phone and didn’t know if he should feel relieved or annoyed or concerned.

Neal’s primary physician, the one he’d spoken with on Wednesday, had just called to let him know that Neal was being discharged today. She’d spoken with Neal early in the morning to let him know, but he’d seemed a little freaked out and, considering everything he’d been through, the doctor thought it might be a good idea to follow up with the person who was listed as Neal Caffrey’s primary contact. That Peter was an FBI agent seemed to give him some kind of special shine in her eyes.

She had told him that Neal was now at the stage where he’d recuperate easier in his home environment. Of course, he’d need regular nursing supervision – particularly since he’d need IV antibiotics for at least another six to eight weeks. Not to mention physical and respiratory therapy and psych counseling. Neal would be given referrals and prescriptions and a hospitalist would follow up with him over the coming weeks. But the doctor was concerned about Neal’s immediate future.

She’d noted, “By this stage of recovery, most patients are anxious to get out of the hospital. Mr. Caffrey seems reluctant. Is his home situation difficult?”

“I don’t think Neal’s situation is akin to ‘most patients,’ doctor. He was the victim of a violent crime.”

“I know that, Agent Burke – and I know that he’d been held captive for six months. I just think that he’d be happy to go home and put this behind him. But he didn’t seem to be all that happy.”

Peter had cut the doctor off, thanked her and told her he’d look after Neal.

Staring at the phone, he wondered why Neal hadn’t called him. He had his cell phone. When he’d given it to Neal, it had a full charge. He also had Mozzie’s phone. And certainly, one of the nurses would have let him call from their station if both phones had dead batteries.

Maybe this was some subtle form of payback. But that didn’t make sense. He’d spent the better part of two days with Neal. They’d talked, he’d watched over him, and whatever demons had driven him to accuse Peter of abandoning him to his kidnappers that first night seemed exorcised.

And then there was the doctor’s concerns – that Neal seemed less than eager to leave the hospital.

Regardless of Neal’s state of mind, arrangements had to be made. He called June to let her know that Neal was being released today. She was delighted by the news and promised to have his apartment aired out and ready for occupancy. Plus, she said she’d make sure that the service elevator was working – Neal was in no condition to climb so many stairs.

That task done, Peter was about to call Mozzie. Not only to enlist his assistance in getting Neal settled, but to find out if Neal had called him. He knew he was being small and mean and petty, but he couldn’t help it.

The first three numbers he tried went to various bizarre voicemail services, and as he was about to try the fourth, he was interrupted by an incoming call. Peter recognized the number and answered before the first ring finished.
“Hello, Landon.”

“Agent Burke. I trust you’re doing better today.”

“I am.” There was no point in prevaricating.

“Good. It seems as if your request for my assistance might have been a little premature.”

“Ah, then you heard that the NYPD caught Neal’s kidnappers.”

“Yes – good work by the boys in blue.”

“Make that ‘women in blue’, Landon. The cop investigating Neal’s case is female. And in any event, I know you’d pulled some strings before the arrests were made. You got all of the attorneys from the Justice Department and the Parole Commission reassigned. You did what you’d promised – you made sure that not only the worst case scenario couldn’t happen, the next-to-worst case scenario was taken off the table, too.”

“So, Caffrey’s back on the tracker, right?”

Peter didn’t want to lie, because technically, the tracker wasn’t on Neal. “A new anklet was hand delivered by my boss two days ago. Before word got out that the NYPD made arrests. I’ll make that donation tonight.”

“Don’t rush, Agent Burke. My work’s not done yet. You want Caffrey off the tracker, his sentence commuted. I still have a few avenues to explore.”

“Landon – thank you.”

“Your gratitude is noted. And appreciated. I like you, Agent Burke. You always want to do the right thing, even when it’s not convenient or comfortable. And you seem to expect the best of people. Usually, veterans of the law enforcement profession tend to be a bit more jaded.”

Peter wasn’t sure how to react to that compliment. Because how many times had he expected the worst of Neal, only to find out that Neal had met those low expectations for some very high-minded reasons?

“If you ever decide to leave the Bureau, let me make you an offer. I could use a man of your vision and talents. Someone who’ll remind me why I do what I do. That it’s not really about the scorecard or the money or the bold-faced-names in my address book.”

Peter wasn’t sure what to say except “Thank you.”

“There’s still no reason to thank me.” Landon abruptly ended the call and left Peter sitting there, feeling slightly foolish. He put that feeling away and got back to the question of what to do about Neal.

And he had to laugh. Hadn’t that be the question that he’d been asking himself for more than four years? If he wanted to find the moment when his life had irrevocably changed, he could pinpoint it down to the very second – when he told Neal he’d see him back at Sing-Sing in one week.

But nostalgia wasn’t going to answer this question. He could call Neal, but to be honest, it would be easier if he just went up to the hospital and took charge. Except there were a million things to do before he could do that. Like being an ASAC in charge of a busy FBI office. He’d been delegating almost everything to Diana and Clinton the past week, but there was work that he needed to handle
himself. Tasks with deadlines and dependencies and people who weren’t Neal relying on him.

And then he remembered that Neal had no clothes, no shoes, no coat and it was a January for the record books. It was also noon on a Friday. Driving up to June’s house to fetch Neal’s clothes and then coming back downtown to fetch Neal and take him back seemed ridiculous.

Whatever his feelings about his job and the FBI, he was still ASAC of the White Collar Division and had a staff to command. He called Diana into his office.

She came immediately. “What’s up, boss?”

“Are any of the probies free?”

“They can be made free if you need something. Why? What do you need?”

“It’s technically not within the job description of an FBI agent. Even a probationary one.”

“Since when has that stopped you? Or any of us? Probies are here for a reason. To do the shit we don’t have time for.” Diana laughed. “Come on, what do you need?”

“Neal’s being released from the hospital today. He’ll need some clothes and shoes and a coat. I could run up to his place and get what he needs.”

“Or you could send a probie.”

“Was actually thinking about giving one of them my credit card and sending him or her to get Neal some sweats, a warm jacket and some sneakers.”

“That makes a lot more sense than making some poor kid root through Neal’s closet and get traumatized for life by that wardrobe of his.”

Peter had to laugh. “Or turn to a life of crime after seeing it.”

“Yeah. I’ll send Carter up. He’s got a good head on his shoulders and something approaching fashion sense. Though I’d pay good money to see Neal in heather-gray sweats, knock-off Chucks and a puffy coat.”

“I’ll be sure to take a picture.” It was good to joke about Neal. Especially with Diana. Which reminded him. “Is Moz watching Theo today? I tried most of the numbers I have for him, but he hasn’t answered.”

“Yeah, but I think both of them are spending the day napping. Moz was a little tired after his undercover brother role. I am going to torment him with that for a long, long time.”

“Do me a favor, when you check in with him, ask him to call me.”

“Will do.”

“Thanks, Di.”

Diana left and his assistant, Andrea, came in with a stack of files that needed his signature.

“Anything urgent?”

She gave him a weary smile. “Nothing more than usual – which means all of it. Do I need to clear your schedule again?”
“Probably.”

“Hospital?”

“How did you guess?” The question was rhetorical. Andrea had been Reese’s admin since before Peter had joined White Collar. They’d a few difficulties in the year since Reese’s retirement – mostly because she’d been accustomed to working for someone who preferred the role of administrator and Peter wasn’t used to having someone try to manage his schedule. But over the past few months, they’d reached something close to a rapport. It didn’t hurt that Neal had once helped her get her granddaughter into a special art-therapy program. She’d taken the news of his kidnapping and injuries very badly.

“Please give Mr. Caffrey my best wishes.”

“I will.”

She left the folders and Carter, the probie Diana had recommended, knocked. “You have an assignment for me, Agent Burke?”

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“What do you mean, you’re being released today?” El stared at Neal in amazement. A nurse just came in to prep him for the insertion of a PICC line he’d need for the IV antibiotics he’d have to have twice a day.

“Ma’am, you need to leave the room.”

She waved off the nurse. “Just give me a second. Neal – I’ve been here for hours, you haven’t said a word.”

Neal didn’t look at her, and Elizabeth tried not to look at Neal – or at least his bare chest, which was covered in mottled bruises and scabbed over cuts. “Look – it’s …” Neal sighed and bit his lip.

She wasn’t sure what was going on in his head, but whatever it was, it was wrong to take her anger out on him. “I’m guessing you haven’t called Peter or Mozzie or June.”

“No.”

“And I’m thinking that you don’t have any clothes or a warm coat.”

He gave her a strained smile. “Not even a pair of shoes.”

“Okay – let me see what I can do. Maybe they’ve got something at the nurses’ station or I can get you something from the gift shop.” She ignored the impatient nurse and kissed Neal on the forehead. “I’ll be back in a few, behave.”

That earned her a laugh. “I’ll do my best, but I don’t know if that’s possible.”

Elizabeth headed down to the nurses’ station, hoping that they might have at least a pair of sweats for Neal. Something someone might have left behind. If not, she’d head out of the hospital – this was Midtown Manhattan, the shopping capital of the world. Except that she’d left her coat, her purse and her phone in Neal’s room and until they finished the procedure, she couldn’t retrieve them.

Of course, the nurses’ station had nothing suitable for Neal, although someone offered to hunt down a clean pair of scrubs. No promises were made, though.
El was headed back towards Neal's room when a familiar figure emerged from the elevator at the end of the hallway. “Peter?” She ignored all protocol about proper hospital behavior and ran to him.

“El?”

His arms wrapped around her and something hit her ass lightly and dropped to the floor, but she didn’t care. Peter felt so damn good.

“What are you doing here?”

She lifted her head and his mouth met hers in a kiss that she’d needed for months. The noise of a busy medical floor faded into nothingness as everything that had been wrong in her world righted itself.

Peter reluctantly lifted his mouth away and she stared at his lips, bemused.

“Hon?”

The love in his voice was a balm – it made her believe that whatever missteps and mistakes they’d both made the last six months, they could overcome them. “Hon.” She rested her head against Peter’s warm, strong shoulder, completely unconcerned that they were standing in the middle of a busy hospital floor.

“I’m glad you’re here – but I didn’t think you were coming in until tomorrow.”

“I needed to see you. And …” El licked her lips, suddenly nervous. “I needed to see Neal, too.”

“Yeah.” That single word conveyed an epic of understanding.

“We have a lot to talk about, hon.” El stepped out of the way to let a gurney pass and nearly tripped on something. “What?” She looked down and saw a pile of bags at her feet.

Peter bent to pick them up. “Sorry, hon. They’re releasing Neal today and he needed some clothes and stuff.”

She let out a bark of laughter. “I know. I was on the hunt for something for him to wear.”

Peter sighed and stared down the hallway. “I wish I knew what was going on in his head. Neal didn’t call me – his doctor did.”

El took a few of the bags from him. “I know what you mean – I’ve been here since eleven and we’ve been talking, but he didn’t say a damn thing about being released. I only found out a few minutes ago, when the nurse arrived to put in a PICC line. She’s in there with him now.”

“His doctor said that she thinks that Neal doesn’t want to leave.”

El thought about that. “It makes sense, in a way.”

“It does?” Peter seemed confused.

“Yeah, hon, it does. Right now, the hospital’s a safe place. He doesn’t have to deal with anything more than healing. There’s no danger here. No external danger, at least.”

“Hmm, that makes sense.” Peter smiled down at her. “Welcome home, Mrs. Burke. I’ve missed you.”
El rested her head on Peter’s shoulder, happier than she had been in nearly half a year. “I’ve missed you, too.”
Chapter 25

Sometime in Late January – Friday Afternoon

“You’re all set, Mr. Caffrey.” The nurse fitted the knitted sleeve over his arm and adjusted it so that the IV port didn’t snag. “There are instructions on how to care for the PICC line in your discharge papers, but do you have any questions?”

Neal felt a little woozy and didn’t answer. He felt strangely free, too. The last piece of medical equipment – his IV – had been disconnected.

“Mr. Caffrey? Are you okay?” The nurse leaned over him.

“Yeah – yeah. I’m fine. Do I have any questions?”

She nodded. “Do you?”

“Bathing?”

“Shower only, and put on the waterproof sleeve.” She pointed to the package left on the bedside table. “And don’t take long showers or very hot ones. You’ve still got incisions that are healing and those will need to be kept dry, too. If your arm aches, use a heating pad. And of course, if it starts to swell, or the port site become red and tender, you’ll need to come in and have it checked out. It might be infected.”

“Ironic – I have to have this because I need antibiotics and the line itself might give me an infection.”

The nurse made a face. “Yeah, medicine can kill you if you’re not careful. Someone will be in with your discharge papers in a little bit. Do you want me to help you get dressed?”

“Helps to have some clothes.” He plucked at the hospital gown. “This is all I’ve got.”

“Really? Didn’t your wife bring you your clothes?” The nurse looked over at the small piece of luggage Elizabeth had parked next to the chair.

“Oh, no – she’s not my wife. Just a good friend who’s in from out of town.”

“Okay – let me see what I can scrounge up for you. You can’t leave with your junk flapping around. It’s a little chilly for that.”

Neal chuckled. “Yeah. Wouldn’t want to scare the tourists.”

“Maybe we have some scrubs and some booties for you, let me check.”

“No necessary.” Peter was standing in the door, holding several bulging shopping bags. “It’s all taken care of.”

The nurse snorted and said something about good timing and left.

Peter tossed the bags on the bed and loomed over him, looking exasperated. A familiar expression, to say the least. “Your doctor called me.”

Elizabeth wedged between her husband and the bed and dropped another bag. “Peter, don’t get aggravated. Neal had his reasons for not saying anything.”
Peter sighed and looked at Elizabeth with utter love and happiness that Neal felt himself starting to tear up. Elizabeth might have confessed to deep problems in her marriage with Peter, but something wonderful must have happened between them in the half-hour she’d been gone from his room. Then Peter’s gaze turned back to Neal, his eyes searching and seeing so much.

After all this time, Neal should have been used to that look and been able to summon a smile that was both his best weapon and his best defense, but he couldn’t. “Sorry. It’s just…”

The look in Peter’s eyes softened, filled with understanding for everything that Neal didn’t want to say.

He looked away and plucked at the bags Peter’d dropped on the bed. “What’s this?” That was a silly question, since Peter had already said that he’d brought him clothes. But he hadn’t expected to find a fleecy sweat shirt with the New York Giants logo emblazoned across the back.

“There are matching sweatpants, too.” Peter grinned and Neal couldn’t help but respond to his delight.

“You’re evil, you know that.”

“Actually, you can thank Agent Carter – he went shopping.”

“But you told him what to buy, right?”

Peter shrugged, still smiling. “I might have mentioned that you’d be cheered up by your favorite sports team.”

Elizabeth pulled the rest of the clothes out of the bags. There were the promised matching sweatpants, as well as a puffy coat and warm socks that also sported the team logo. And a knit hat. “I like the Giants.”

Neal couldn’t help but remember a conversation he’d had with Peter. It was the very first time they’d really talked. He’d been trying to find a way into Peter’s head, trying to figure out how to make their deal work, knowing that it would be a lot easier to break loose if he knew where to find the chinks in Peter’s armor. So he’d asked, “Big plans for the weekend?”

Thinking about it now, Peter had probably known what he was trying to do, and was playing along, casually replying, “Oh, you know, I gotta fix the sink, catch the game.”

That had given Neal the in he’d needed. “With Elizabeth?”

And Peter stepped right into the trap. “Yeah, yeah, she’s into it. How cool is that? She likes to watch the Giants.”

“Uh-huh. Even on your anniversary?” What came after was the start of a friendship that had alternately thrived and fallen on life-support and now seemed as strong as ever. Neal picked up the fleece and brushed his fingers across the logo. “Yeah, I know you do.”

A knock on the door distracted him, and Peter and Elizabeth stepped away from the bed. The visitor was a stranger. “Mr. Caffrey?”

“Yes?”

“Hi, I’m Renata – your discharge manager. We just have some paperwork to go over before you can get out of here.”
She pushed aside the clothing that had piled up on the table and opened a folder and flipped through the papers before handing it to him. “Your doctors left a lot of instructions. Do you want me to go over this with you?”

Neal looked at the papers. “I think I can read through them.”

“Okay. You have a visiting nurse who will be by twice a day to check your bandages and get your IV antibiotics going. When you get home, call this number —” Renata took the papers back and pulled out the sheet from the visiting nurse service, “to set up your first appointment.”

Neal nodded.

“And you have a list of referrals for physical therapy, respiratory rehabilitation and for psychotherapy.”

Neal nodded again, but he was starting to feel overwhelmed.

“There’s a list of medications and prescriptions. We didn’t call them in because you didn’t provide a pharmacy.”

The woman kept talking but her voice became an annoying buzz until Peter cut her off. “I think we can manage from here. Is there anything that Neal has to sign?”

“No. Mr. Caffrey’s a crime victim, so the city will cover his hospital bill. Everything else is in the folder. Someone from outpatient services will follow up with him over the next few days.” She handed the folder back to Neal, but Peter intercepted it. “You’re a free man, Mr. Caffrey. Take care and feel better.”

Silence filled the room after Renata left.

Elizabeth took charge. “Okay, let’s get you dressed.” She unpacked the rest of the clothes. “At least the underwear doesn’t have any logos on them.”

She opened a package of plain white Hanes y-fronts and handed him a pair.

Neal sat there and blinked. “Uh, Elizabeth?”

“What’s the matter, sweetie?”

Neal bit his lip and looked at her. “I – um – ”

Peter, thankfully, understood. “I think Neal would like to get dressed.”

“And what’s stopping him?”

“You, hon.”

Neal almost laughed when Elizabeth blushed bright red. “Ah, okay. I’ll just be out here –” She pointed towards the hallway. “Waiting.”

She shut the door and Peter pulled the curtain around the bed. “Just in case anyone walks in.”

“Um – would you mind?” He wanted Peter to leave, too.

“Neal – ”
Sick and suddenly ashamed, he whispered. “Please go. I can manage.”

Unlike Elizabeth, Peter didn’t retreat. “Do you want me to call someone or do you want me to help?”

Neal took a deep breath, as deep as the limits of his damaged lungs would allow. “You’d think, after more than a week in the hospital, being poked and prodded by all sorts of strangers, I’d be okay.”

In an instant, a multitude of expressions crossed Peter’s face. Shock, concern, shame. But thankfully, not pity. That would have been unbearable. Peter repeated his offer. “I can get an aide, if it would be easier for you.”

“No – I don’t think so. I trust you.” Neal chuckled, the humor a touch bitter. “You’re the only one I trust. I don’t think that will ever change.”

Peter gasped and Neal didn’t understand why. Nor did he understand why Peter looked as if he was about to cry. He asked, “What do you want me to do?”

But he didn’t want to be naked in front of Peter, he didn’t want Peter to see what had been done to him. “Can you sit behind me? I don’t want you to see me.” Neal wasn’t sure how he managed to admit that. “I – just -”

Peter understood. “Whatever you need, Neal.”

He could do this.

Peter was fussing with another package – of tee shirts. “Can you manage getting this over your head?”

“I think so.” And then Neal realized that he’d have to strip off the hospital gown. He sat there, holding the tee shirt. The slight stiffness of the clean and new cotton felt like a precious luxury.

As Neal had asked, Peter sat down so he was behind him, and undid the ties which kept the hospital gown closed. It slid down Neal’s shoulders and came to rest on his forearms. He shivered and lifted his hands so the gown fell off completely. Peter took the tee shirt from him, and as if he was a small child, put one arm through, then the other – and then carefully maneuvered the shirt until it covered his torso.

Peter tried to save his dignity. “Can you manage the shorts?”

Neal considered the logistics. He couldn’t bend over, but he was able to bring his legs up and get them into the underwear. Peter helped pull them up and over his hips, and although Neal couldn’t see his face, he was certain that Peter was looking at something other than his wasted frame, that he wasn’t mapping the new geography of his body – not only the loss of muscle, but the flesh damaged by six months of torture. He shivered again, his body flinching against the memory of whips and fists and boots.

The memory receded as a familiar hand rested lightly on his shoulder. “You all right?”

Neal tried to answer, but if he said yes, it would be a lie. And he didn’t lie to Peter. The best he could come up with was, “I will be.”

“Good. That’s all you can ask for.”

Peter handed him the bright blue sweatpants and then, in a move that embarrassed the hell out of him, got on his knees and put warm socks on his feet. But Peter found a bit of levity when he slid a
pair of sneakers on him. “Knowing your shoe size finally came in handy.”

Neal had to laugh. It was either that or cry. He stood up, feeling both incredibly weak and stronger than he had since the day he’d stormed away from Peter, only to find himself in a hellhole worse than anything he could ever have imagined.

Peter looked around the room. “Where’s my cell phone?”

Neal opened the drawer to the bedside cabinet and took out Peter’s phone and the one that Mozzie had given him. Of course, Moz wouldn’t want it back, but there was no point in leaving it behind. “Thanks.”

Peter pocketed the phone and looked like he wanted to ask him a question. Neal could figure that one out pretty easily – Why didn’t you call and tell me you were released? Why won’t you let me help you?

But Peter didn’t ask. He just picked up the fleece and held it out for Neal to put on. It zipped up the front, and he managed to put it on himself – although he was panting from exhaustion by the time he’d finished.

Finally, there was the horrible puffy coat with “New York Giants” emblazoned across the front and the back. Neal looked at it in slight horror.

“It’s ten degrees out there, Neal. You never have to wear it again.”

Once upon a time, he might have made a quip about rather being dead than wearing something so hideous, but since he’d been almost dead a little more than two weeks ago, he said nothing and put the garment on.

“I guess I’m ready.”

Peter gave him a sharp, satisfied nod. “I think you are. Time to go home.”
Chapter 26

Sometime in Late January – Friday Evening

Thinking back over the last two weeks, Peter had wondered if he would ever have this moment again. Knowing that Neal was in his own bed in his apartment – his "cappuccino in the clouds" - Elizabeth was upstairs, washing up, getting ready for an evening meal with him – albeit delivery Chinese – and Satchmo was relaxing at his feet.

It wasn't so long ago that these simple pleasures seemed out of reach, gone from his life and never coming back.

But Neal was safe and the animals responsible for hurting him were in jail. He was healing and although that road was going to be long and difficult, it was a journey he had already started. Peter didn't want to think about everything that Neal was going to have to endure, have to get past, get around, get over – if one could actually ever get over six months of torture.

For the moment, Peter took deep pleasure in the little triumphs. Neal trusting him enough to let him help get him dressed, walking from the front of the hospital into the waiting car, and then from the car, up the stairs into the welcoming arms of June, with Moz standing right behind her.

He and El hadn't stayed long after that. Neal was visibly at the end of his rope – he was shaking by the time the ancient elevator came to a creaking halt on the top floor. Peter wasn't sure if it was a bad reaction to the small, dark space or exhaustion, but he had a hard time stopping himself from picking Neal up and carrying him into the apartment.

Peter had hovered until Moz pushed him away. He'd looked to El for some kind of guidance, and she had given him a wry smile, as if to say, "Let Moz have this moment." So he had, assuring Neal that he'd be back tomorrow. Neal had seemed grateful – for both the assurance and for Peter's imminent departure.

"Looks like there's more snow in the forecast." El came downstairs and flopped down next to him on the couch.

"Do you think this winter will ever end?"

"A few more days and we'll find out."

Peter looked at her, puzzled.

"Groundhog Day."

"Ah, right." He laughed. "The best sort of magical thinking."

El leaned against him and Peter draped an arm around her shoulders. "We're going to be okay, aren't we?" He hadn't intended to have this conversation right now, but the words just popped out of his mouth.

"Yeah, we are. We both have a lot of work to do, but we'll be good. We are good."

"I'm sorry. For everything I said to you the other day, for all the times I didn't say anything. For being so helplessly angry. For taking it out on you."
She snuggled against him, sighing with happiness. "I know you are, and I forgive you. And I hope you'll forgive me – for my blindness, my own silence. For not being here when you needed me."

"Ah, El – of course." It wasn't going to be easy to get back to where they should be, but this was a start.

As they sat together, a long-absent emotion simmered between them. Not desire, but peace. Peter picked up her hand and threaded his fingers through hers, content just to be in the moment with the one person he loved and trusted beyond words. It had been so very long since they were able to be like this, together and comfortable, and he almost dared not think the word – be he was actually happy.

Eventually, the doorbell rang and the arrival of dinner interrupted the moment. For the first time in a very long time, Peter was looking forward to a meal.

Over a shared order of mu shu pork, El too casually asked, "What happens now?"

"What do you mean?"

"With Neal?"

"Well, he's not going back to prison." That last word left a terrible taste in his mouth.

"I know that, Neal told me. He also said that they got the people who took him."

"Yeah."

"Hon, it's going to be all right." She reached over and squeezed his hand. "The nightmare is over."

Peter sighed. "I know, for me – it is. Neal's got a long hard road ahead of him."

El nodded, but she was persistent. "You didn't really answer my question. What happens to him now?"

Peter pushed away his plate, his appetite gone. "For now, he's still considered a felon on work release. I'm still his handler."

"The FBI expects him to go back to work?"

Peter shrugged. "Bruce came up to New York yesterday to deliver the news that Neal would be serving the rest of his sentence. And to give me a new tracker."

"Which you haven't put on Neal."

"You noticed."

El nodded slowly. "It would be kind of hard to miss."

"I don't want to do it, El. He's been through so much. Putting him back on a leash seems like the worst sort of insult." He scrubbed at his eyes, suddenly weary beyond words. "I keep thinking, if I never put it on him, who would know? The Marshals don't ping monitors that aren't active."

"But they might check Neal's – you know he's not their favorite felon."

"I know – and I know that I've made a lot of enemies in the Justice Department, people who can make life difficult for Neal if they find out that I haven't put it on him."
"It doesn't seem like you have a choice. You'll have to do it." El started to clean off the table and stopped, giving him a searching look. "You don't want him to run, do you?"

Peter had to be honest. "The thought has crossed my mind, but then we'd be right back to where we started. Even with Moz's support, Neal isn't up to a life on the run and I don't think I could live with myself if he ran and ended up back in prison."

"He has, what? Six months left? That shouldn't be so bad, even if he's on the tracker." El grimaced at her own words.

"Under ordinary circumstances, no"

"But this is Neal, and circumstances are never ordinary."

"No, never." Peter shook his head. "He was chained to a wall for months, remember? How can I put this back on him?"

"But maybe he'd want it back on. Think about it, hon. Just maybe Neal would feel better knowing you were watching out for him.

Peter wasn't so sure and he shrugged in response. El dumped the dishes in the sink and shoveled the leftovers into the garbage. "Come on, let's call it a night." She tugged on him until he got up. "I know you haven't been sleeping."

Peter didn't resist. "No, and I spent the past few nights in the hospital with Neal. I don't even remember what my – what our – bed feels like."

She led him upstairs. "Then it's time you became reacquainted. With your bed. And your wife."

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"Go home, Moz." Neal was exhausted and he wanted to do nothing more than ease himself under the covers of his bed and sleep. The very idea of sleeping without interruption, sleeping in safety, was enough to bring him to tears.

But Moz wasn't listening to him. He sat at the dining table, an open bottle of Malbec and a half-eaten apple before him. "You know, Neal – there's nothing keeping you here."

"Moz?" He was tired and he didn't have the strength to follow Moz's byzantine thought processes.

Moz gestured to his foot with the paring knife. "You haven't got a leash. You could leave right now, no one would be the wiser."

"No." His response was automatic, visceral.

"Why not? There are doctors everywhere. We don't even have to fly commercial. A private jet to Paris and the world is ours."

"Moz, no. I'm not running."

Moz wasn't giving up. "But that's the beauty of it, you wouldn't be running. Peter hasn't put your tracker back on. That should tell you something."

When Neal didn't answer, Moz filled in the blank. "They're not putting it back on. You're a free man, Neal."
But I don't feel free. "Go home, Moz. I'm tired and I want to go to sleep."

"I'll be quiet."

"Look, I appreciate what you're doing, but really – go home." Neal was at the end of his rope and he didn't have the energy to be polite. If Moz took offense, if he left in a huff, that would be fine.

But Moz didn't leave. "Get into bed."

"Don't order me around." Neal had his fill of that.

"Neal, please get into bed."

"I will, as soon as you leave." Neal gripped the edge of the table; it kept him upright.

Moz gave him a hard look – one that Neal had trouble deciphering. "You have a golden opportunity here. You're wasting it."

Neal gave in, just a little. "We can talk tomorrow. Just let me sleep."

Moz softened. "Okay. And I'm not really going far. June's letting me sleep here tonight." He walked over to the nightstand and picked up something – a pink and white plastic walkie-talkie. One half of a baby monitor. "Don't turn it off – if you're smart. If you need anything – and I mean anything - just shout."

Neal forced a smile and watched Moz leave. He didn't need a minder or a nurse and he shut the damn monitor off. And for good measure, pulled out the batteries. Moz wasn't above rigging switches.

He hobbled over to the bed, wincing with every step. It was almost too much effort to strip out of the New York Giants regalia that Peter had gotten for him. He managed to drop the sweatpants on the floor and slid off the zippered sweatshirt, but the tee shirt and shorts were going to have to stay on.

And honestly, he didn't think he was up to sleeping in his skin. His beat-up, bruised and scabbed over skin.

Neal slipped under the covers and sighed in weary happiness at the caress of good cotton. He remembered his first night here, almost four years ago. The pleasure then was a faint echo of what he was feeling now.

He closed his eyes and rather than fall asleep, his brain started to whir. Moz's suggestion about leaving was unacceptable, but it brought up a whole host of questions. What was his status? Peter had assured him that he wasn't going back to prison, but he'd said nothing else. The psychiatrist had arrived to do her evaluation, then Peter came back with Sergeant Benson to share the news of the arrest, and after that, there never seemed to be a moment when he could ask.

And the crazy thing was, Neal wasn't sure he wanted his freedom anymore. He rubbed his right foot against his left ankle and felt the soft cotton sock and nothing else. No tracker.

Except during his brief interlude on Cape Verde – and, of course, those months in prison after Kate was killed - almost every night for three and a half years, he'd made that gesture, hoping against hope that the damn thing would magically unlock itself.

Of course it never did, and he'd fall asleep to elaborate fantasies of waking up a free man, having the whole world to explore, with no one watching his every movement.
And now, he lay here and wished he'd had the tracker back. He wished that there was someone holding the leash, watching his every movement. Watching out for him, making sure he was safe.

He stared at the ceiling, the cold moonlight from the French doors illuminating the apartment. He once knew every shadow.

Sleep remained elusive. He had pills he could take, mild sedatives that would take the edge off, but he didn't want to start down that route. The pain was manageable – if there was a nurse around to ask, he'd say a five or six out of ten.

He just couldn't shut off his brain. The questions he had about his status devolved into more inchoate fears. *Was that a shadow on the terrace?*

Neal pushed himself up, ignoring the pull on his abused body, and switched on the bedside lamp. He found the batteries for the baby monitor and put them back in. He flipped the switch and it powered up with soothing chirp. He turned the nightlight off – somehow, doing this was easier in the dark. "Moz, you there?"

"Yeah, you okay?" Neal was a little surprised to hear his friend's voice, that he'd rigged the simple monitor for two way communications.

"Would you mind?" He hated himself, he hated asking.

"Mind what?"

"Coming upstairs? Keeping me company?"

"Not at all. I've spent many nights – and days – on that couch. Be there in a second."

A minute or two later, a shaft of light poured into the apartment as Mozzie opened the door. "Everything all right?"

"Yeah." *It is, now.*

The light dimmed and died as Moz shut the door. Neal could hear Moz approach the bed and in the dimness, he could see that his friend was holding out something. "Here, this might help."

Neal took it and tried not to cry. It was Mozart, scruffy, threadbare, missing half his stuffing, and smelling very much like Moz – the essence of a good Italian red, with a touch of some high-quality weed, and underneath, everything wonderful and familiar about the man who rescued him, pulled him into danger, and trusted him with his dreams.

"Yeah, I think it will. Thank you, Moz."

"You're welcome, Neal. I'll be on the couch if you need me." Moz cursed a bit as he banged against a piece of furniture.

Neal tucked the bear under his chin and hugged it gently.

To his surprise, he slept.
Chapter 27

Sometime in Late January – Saturday Morning

Peter woke slowly and sighed in happiness. Elizabeth was using him like a pillow. It had been too long since he'd had that pleasure. When El had been home – so infrequently during the past few months – the gulf between them was never more fully evident than at night, when they'd clung to the opposite sides of the mattress, barely able to stand the sound of each other's breathing.

El stirred, her hair tickling his nose, and he couldn't stop a small sneeze. She opened her eyes and gave him a sleepy smile. "Hey, hon."

"Hey, hon." He kissed her forehead, the bridge of her nose, and as she leaned over him, he captured her lips. He smiled into the kiss as her small, hot hand snaked under the waistband of the worn out running shorts he wore to bed and found his cock.

"Mmmm, yes." He sighed in pleasure as she slowly jacked him. They'd made love three times last night – love, not the mechanical sex they'd both barely enjoyed over the past few months – and Peter was frankly astounded at his body's ready response this morning.

El licked her lips and opened her mouth, but Peter raised a hand, cutting her off. "Can I go first?"

She nodded.

He had so many things to say, he wasn't sure where to start. Maybe with the easy one. "I made a deal with the devil."

El blinked. "Hon?"

"Remember Landon Shepherd?"

She nodded. "The fixer? The woman who was Sara's friend – the one where we made those pictures?"

Peter chuckled and felt his cheeks burn. "Yeah, her."
El gave him a look, more cautious than concerned. "What did you do?"

"Last week, when it looked like Neal was going to be sent back to prison, I called her."

El nodded, but didn't say anything.

"We met for lunch and I asked for her some assistance." Peter took a sip of now-cold coffee to cover his nervousness. "I would have promised her anything if she could help."

"Anything?"

"Yeah. I was … desperate."

El wasn't shocked or angry or even puzzled. She just sort of smiled. "I hope you haven't agreed to be her sex slave. I might have a hard time sharing."

Peter tried to laugh, but he needed to tell Elizabeth everything. "If she'd asked, I would have promised to throw a case. I would have agreed to kill someone. To keep Neal safe." Peter put his hands flat on the table, they were shaking so badly.

"And did you?"

"You don't sound shocked."

"Peter – I know all too well what you've been going through. I should have seen it long ago, and I'll never forgive myself for that. You were desperate. And where Neal is concerned, nothing is easy."

If he ever had any doubts that they'd get past the trauma of the last six months, he didn't anymore. "She didn't want anything like that."

"Oh? Then what was her price?"

"A hefty donation to a favorite charity – for rape and incest survivors. Ten thousand dollars."

"We'll double that."

"El – "

"It's a small enough price to pay, Peter. And we can afford it."

Peter reached out and took his wife's hand. "Thank you."

"But I don't think this is all of it."

"No. There's more." This was the part that Peter wasn't sure about – it still wasn't sorted out in his head. "But I don't know if I'm ready to talk about it."

"Okay." El fiddled with her hair.

Peter watched here, eyes narrowed. "Hon, what's the matter? Are you okay?"

"Why? Why do you think something's wrong?"

"When you play with your hair like that, it's a sure sign that you're nervous about something. It's like Mozzie wiping his glasses."

El laughed and dropped the lock of hair. "I thought I'd stopped doing that."
"Well? What's going on?" Peter was pretty sure it was important, but not bad in the way that so many things had been bad for the past six months.

"I'm thinking about quitting. About leaving the National Gallery and coming home, for good."

 elast's here and Neal's here and I need to be here, with you."

Peter got a strange look on his face.

"Hon?" El wasn't sure what her husband was thinking.

He huffed out a sigh. "What if I told you that I was thinking about retiring from the FBI?"

El should have been surprised, but she wasn't. "Peter – "

"I don't think I can go on there for much longer. I've burned a lot of bridges – when Neal first went missing and since he was found."

"Do you think that they'll fire you?"

Peter shook his head. "I don't know. It could be a risk. But to be honest, I've lost my love for the work and maybe it's time to look at new horizons. I've been an agent for more than two decades – I'm at the point that they'll be asking me to go under the seniority rules."

"You've always said that there are always exceptions to the mandatory retirement rule – and you're an ASAC, I thought that meant you were exempt, anyway." They'd had this discussion a few times, as Peter's seniority crept up.

"Yeah, but." He sighed again. "It's not the same, El."

"It's Neal." Of course, it's Neal. It's always Neal. But there was no rancor in that thought. Just resignation.

"Yeah. I don't know what's going to happen in the short term. Landon's still working on getting him completely free, and after that – Neal's not going to stay in New York. And even if she doesn't get him an early release, Neal's done in six months. He'll be gone after that."

"Are you sure?"

"Am I sure about what?"

"That Neal will take off?" El was pretty certain that Neal wasn't going anywhere anytime soon.

"Why wouldn't he? Why would he stay?"

"Because he's been through hell, because he needs his friends – the people who have become his family. Because he needs you, hon."

Peter didn't answer.

"Remember our telephone conversation the other night?"
"Yeah. We were in a bad place then."

"And we're better now. But what I said is still the truth. Neal needs you, you protect him. You'd sacrifice everything for him."

"Anything but you."

El had doubts, but she also knew that Peter would sacrifice Neal to protect her, so it was a zero-sum game.

"I don't want you to quit your job, El."

"But this two-city deal isn't really working. You need me. And that's a hell of a lot more important than a job."

"What if …" Peter trailed off, he looked so torn.

"What if, what?"

"What if I moved to D.C.? Took a job there."

El shook her head. "What about Neal?"

Peter licked his lips. "What if he came with me? What if we gave him a home?" He laughed a little derisively. "I know he's not a puppy or a child, but he's just as vulnerable. What if we gave him a base, a safe haven? Maybe find a place with a guest house?" The words tumbled out of Peter and it was clear that he hadn't really thought about this before, but now that he'd mentioned it, he seemed to be falling in love with the idea. And so was she, which surprised her. After everything, it seemed a bit odd to be so willing to make Neal a permanent part of her life. But she understood that Peter could never leave Neal behind and she knew – after the debacle of the past few months – that she couldn't leave Peter behind, either. Giving Neal a place to roost, temporarily or permanently, could be the ideal solution. "Do you think Neal would leave New York for Washington?"

"If, as you say, he doesn't want to leave me, then maybe he would. But first things first. You're not quitting the National Gallery, and I'm not leaving the FBI until Neal's released or his sentence is done. After that …"

But Elizabeth still wasn't sure that spending her weeks in another city was such a wise idea. "Hon, you need me. I can't let what happened to us before happen again."

"I know – and I do need you. But things are different now, right?"

El nodded. "Of course, but –"

"I love you even more than you know for wanting to come home, but I don't want you to close a door prematurely." Peter gave her a sad smile. "I need you. I've missed you and I'll miss you every moment that we're apart, but I think we can make it work now. You can always resign, but you can't undo that once it's done."

Peter seemed so passionate about this, so full of life, so much like the man he'd been before – before Neal had been kidnapped. Elizabeth felt like she had to agree, for his sake if not for her own. "Okay – but we'll play this on a month to month basis. The moment you want me back here, you tell me. No more suffering in silence, Peter. For both our sakes."
He picked up her hand and kissed it, right above her wedding ring. She cupped her hand around his cheek.

Yes, they were going to be able to make this work.

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The visiting nurse arrived a little after nine, but Neal wasn't ready to see her. He wasn't ready to see anyone.

June brought her up, but Neal didn't want to get out of bed.

"Neal, darling? Is everything all right?"

He sighed and the intense desire – almost need – to be left alone battled with his love and respect for June. "I'm okay. Just moving a little slowly this morning."

"Ah. We'll go back downstairs and just let me know when you're ready."

"No. Just give me a second." Neal pushed back the covers and managed to get to his feet without too much trouble.

"Let me help you." The nurse rushed over.

"NO!" Neal shouted and then immediately apologized. "Just let me …" He winced as his various injuries made themselves known, "do for myself."

The nurse backed off, but she didn't seem offended. "Sorry. We should probably set up a protocol for my visits."

Neal nodded. "What are you going to do to me?"

"Check your vitals, change your bandages, run the IV antibiotics, clean out your PICC line. Run through some standard questions."

"Okay." Neal looked over at June, who was still hovering by the door. "Is Mozzie around?"

"Yes, he's being a sweetheart and has taken Bugsy out. He should be back soon."

Neal ground his teeth together and told himself to cowboy up. He hadn't had problems with the medical staff at the hospital and this nurse, who looked like she was old enough to be his grandmother, was no threat. "Okay – can you ask him to come up when he gets back?"

June gave him a searching look, like she understood everything going on in his head. "You'll be okay?"

"I think so. You don't have to hang around and deal with this ickiness."

"It's not icky. I've had three daughters and two granddaughters. I nursed Byron through six years of lung cancer. I could probably clean that PICC line myself. There are some things you never quite forget how to do."

"So, you don't mind staying?"

"No, Neal. Not at all." June took one of her romance novels from the bookcase and settled herself on the couch.
Relieved, Neal turned back to the nurse. She was the soul of patience. "What is your name?"

"Ida Wilson. I've been a nurse for over forty years."

Neal figured she offered that as a way to quell his unreasonable anxiety.

"You've read my file?"

"Nothing more than your recent medical history. I know you were hospitalized for a variety of trauma, and I'm being paid out of the Crime Victims Relief Fund, so I can put two and two together."

Neal gave Ida a thin smile and said, "Shall we get this party started?"

Ida asked Neal about his medical history, drug usage, any allergies he had – all usual questions. She asked about his alcohol consumption and Neal replied, "Moderate." June let out a ladylike snort of disbelief that Ida thankfully ignored.

"Okay, let's check out those bandages."

Neal glanced over at June, who was absorbed in her book. He unbuttoned the pajama top and slipped it off. He didn't meet Ida's eyes as she looked him over. And to his great relief, she didn't comment about the assortment of bruises and scabs that decorated his torso.

"Let's check the surgical wounds." She peeled back the bandages and he hissed as the tape pulled at his skin. "Sorry."

"No, it's okay."

She cleaned the incisions and when Neal shivered from the cold liquid, Ida apologized again. "Sorry, but it can't be helped."

"I know, I know."

"Everything seems to be healing nicely. No sign of infection." After checking his blood pressure and taking his vital, she took out a bag of IV fluid and a portable infusing unit. "This will take about an hour and a half to finish. Where will you be the most comfortable?"

"The bed, I think."

"Good choice for today."

Ida set up the IV, checked the infuser unit and, once everything was working, told him she'd be back in about ninety minutes. "Here's my cell phone number in case you start having problems. I have a patient to see on 86th and Broadway, so I'm no more than five minutes away." She put the card down on the bedside table.

"Okay, thanks." Neal tried to calm the building panic, taking deep breaths, focusing on the dust motes dancing in the weak winter sunlight.

Ida turned to June, who had joined her at Neal's bedside. "He should eat something; will that be a problem to arrange?"

"No, not at all. I was just going to ask if I could have a tray sent up for Neal."

"That would be perfect." Ida packed her bag, put on her coat and checked Neal's IV one more time. "See you in a bit. Don't move around if you don't have to."
"Nope, I've got no plans to go anywhere." Neal smiled, and he hoped he didn't look too freakish.

Ida left and Mozzie arrived at the same moment, carrying a breakfast tray. Neal tried to summon an appetite, but all he could manage was a few sips of orange juice and a bite of a croissant. His friends looked like they were about to push at him and he prevaricated, "It's the antibiotics. I'll probably be starving in a couple of hours." That might be true, but he wasn't going to count on it.

Neal must have dozed off because the next thing he felt was a hand on him. Half-asleep and panicked, he screamed and tried to strike out.

"Hey, hey. It's just me, Ida."

Sick to his stomach from the residual adrenaline, Neal tried to focus on the elderly face leaning over him. "Sorry."

"No, I'm sorry. I should have announced my presence, but I didn't want to wake you. I'll do that in the future, okay?"

"I didn't hurt you, did I?"

"Nah, I'm a tough old bird."

"Where's Moz?"

"Your friend, the bald guy?"

"Yeah."

"He gave me a strange look and took off when I got here. I get the feeling he doesn't care for medical professionals."

"Yeah. He has some issues." That barely began to describe it.

Ida detached the IV bag and packed up the infuser unit. "I'll be back around five o'clock. And don't forget to set up your appointments for respiratory therapy. Got to get your lungs back in shape."

Neal nodded absently. He was supposed to see all sorts of therapists and doctors, but the very idea of leaving the apartment made him antsy.
Chapter 28

Sometime in Late January – Saturday Afternoon

"Are you sure you don't want me to come with you?"

"No, hon. I need to do this on my own." Peter gave El a smile, but his heart wasn't in it. "I know you think that being there might soften the blow, but I don't think it will."

El looked skeptical, but she didn't press the issue. She knew he'd gotten a call from the Marshal's Service this morning after they'd talked and sort of made plans for their future - for the three of them. The Marshals didn't care about their plans, they were concerned that Neal's new tracker hadn't been activated. Peter hadn't bothered with lies or excuses, just telling them that he hadn't put it on Neal yet. When they asked why, he said it was none of their business and hung up.

The case with the tracker was sitting on the dining room table and Peter didn't even want to touch it. The contents represented so much that was wrong with the system he'd been part of, the system he'd come to loathe.

"Hon?"

"I'm okay." He put on his coat, checked the weather – it looked like it was about to snow again – found his hat and gloves, and picked up the case. He'd stop at a wine store and pick up something red and expensive for Neal. They'd share a good laugh about that before everything turned to shit. Before Neal looked at him with hatred and resentment again.

What had Neal said to him that night, when he'd gone over to the apartment with a new model tracker? He'd been so full of self-righteous anger and suspicion, full of resentment, still trying to make sense of his quick release from prison and a promotion that he didn't feel he deserved. Neal had been equally angry.

You know, it's scary. It feels strange when it's not on. Like I'm missing something. That's how used to it I've gotten.

Peter made it to the door before turning back. "I don't want to do this, El. It isn't right."

"It's only temporary – you said that that woman, Landon Shepherd, is still working on getting Neal released. If there's anyone who can make that happen, it's her."

Peter nodded, trying to convince himself of that likelihood.

El kissed him. "I love you. You're doing the right thing, and Neal's going to understand that."

Peter hoped so.

He stopped at Bottle Bargains before heading into Manhattan, and found a Barolo that he thought would appeal to Neal's palate. The bottle set him back almost a hundred and fifty bucks, but it would be worth it, if just to see Neal smile.

It started to snow while he was on the Williamsburg Bridge, but after seven weeks of unending winter weather, his fellow New Yorkers were used to it and the traffic was only moderately slower than usual for a Saturday afternoon. A little after one, Peter parked half a block from the Ellington mansion, retrieved the wine bottle and debated leaving the case behind, before grabbing it and
The housekeeper let him in and June was waiting for him, her small pug cradled in her arms. Peter was struck by an almost disorienting wave of déjà vu. "How is he?"

June gave the dog a scratch behind his ears and let him go before gesturing for him to join her in the front parlor. "He's doing okay."

"Really?"

"Yeah – at least on the outside. The visiting nurse was here and he had a minor freak-out, but I think he got over it."

"Moz is with him?"

"Yes, although he ducked out when the nurse came back. Which might be a problem."

Peter was about to ask why and then figured it out. "How often does the nurse come?"

"This week, four times a day. Once in the morning to hook up the antibiotic drip and then to disconnect it about ninety minutes later. She'll be back to administer the second dosage, leave and then come back again for the disconnection. Neal has to go back to the doctor on Friday and if all is good, the dosage will be cut down to once a day for another week and then he'll be able to go on oral antibiotics."

"The nurse told you this?" Peter was a bit surprised.

June laughed. "No, I read Neal's discharge paperwork." June's good humor turned to sadness. "Byron had needed home care like this. Eventually we just hired a live-in nurse."

"I'm sorry." June rarely talked about her late husband to him – at least like this.

"But Neal's going to get better. It's not the same situation at all. I'll be here until Neal doesn't need me anymore."

Peter shouldn't have been surprised at June's commitment, her generosity, but he was. "How about if I take the evening shift?" He was an ASAC now and for the foreseeable future. He had a capable staff and could delegate if he had to. Hell, he'd been delegating for most of the last six months, so why stop now?

June nodded. "That would be nice and I'm sure that Neal would want to see you."

After today, Peter hoped that was true. "I should head up."

The trip up those stairs never felt so long. Standing outside Neal's door, he listened for a moment, but heard nothing more than the indistinct sounds of music – it could have been Beethoven or Mozart or some composer he'd never of. He knocked gently and waited, hearing footsteps.

Mozzie opened the door. "Ah, Suit. Welcome."

Peter was a little startled at Moz's overt friendliness but he took advantage of it and entered the apartment. Neal was sitting at the table, morosely toying with a plate of food. He looked up and gave him a smile. "Hey, Peter."

If it wasn't for the bandages around his throat, the shaggy hair and dark circles around his eyes, this might have been just another morning when he'd arrived too early for Neal's convenience. Except
that it was midday Saturday and Neal had just gotten out of the hospital.

"Neal." Peter sat down at the table as if it was just another ordinary day. He put the case on the floor, the bottle on the table, and helped himself to some coffee. "Everything looks good. A hell of a lot better than hospital food."

"Yeah." Neal ran his fork through the contents of his plate – which might have been seafood salad – before taking a small bite. "Definitely better."

"Whatcha got there, Suit?" Mozzie tapped his foot against the case and Neal leaned over to see. Peter used his foot to slide the case under the table. "Something I have to deal with." Not quite a lie. "I think you might be more interested in this." He pushed the bag with the wine over to Neal.


"It even has a cork."

Moz grabbed the bottle out of his hands and examined it. "It might actually be the real thing."

Peter looked at the man and shook his head. "Yes, you'd know all about re-corking, wouldn't you?"

"I admit to nothing, Suit."

They chatted for a bit, about nothing in particular. It was both ordinary and extremely awkward. Peter had half-hoped that Moz would take himself off, so he could have this confrontation with Neal in private.

Neal interrupted his thoughts. "What's with the sigh?"

Peter gave Neal a wry smile. "I wish I didn't have to do this." He looked at Neal and then at Moz. Moz seemed puzzled but Neal had a look of anticipation on his face.

"Do what, Suit?"

Peter reached under the table and retrieved the box. "This. I'm sorry, Neal." He opened the case and the tracker was in there, waiting for activation. "I don't want to put this on you."

Neal surprised him again. "Why not?"

"You don't deserve this. You deserve your freedom – now more than ever. This is just wrong."

Moz, practically vibrating with anger, asked, "Then why are you doing it?"

"Because I have to. The Marshals have been asking me why it's not activated yet."

Neal said, "You've had this since Thursday. You had it when you were with me in the hospital."

"Yes. Bruce gave it to me when he delivered the news that you were not going back to prison."

"I don't understand. Why didn't you put it on me then?"

"Because it's wrong!" Peter's temper snapped. "This is wrong." He wanted to take the tracker and toss it into the river.

Moz demanded, "Then why are you here with it?"
"Moz, it's okay." Neal made a calming gesture with his hand.

That didn't work and Peter snapped, "No, it's not." Moz uttered those words at the same time Peter did.

"Guys, please." Neal reached over and took the tracker out of the box. "It's okay, it's really okay." Peter was about to start arguing again, but Neal cut him off. "I'm a sick man, remember."

Moz's outrage escalated. "How can you joke about this?"

"Because it's not worth arguing about. It's another six months, right?"

Peter nodded. He didn't want to get Neal's hopes up, but if Landon came through, it could be a lot less.

"It's not like I'm going anywhere, Moz."

The little guy nodded but he was still radiating anger. "I don't like it."

"It's not for you to like or dislike." Neal was the voice of reason, but Peter could see the anxiety in his eyes.

"Hrumph." Moz stared at both of them, and Peter thought that he was lucky that Moz liked violence even less than Neal did. "I'm going to go out for a bit, if just so I don't have to witness this abomination."

Moz slammed the door as he left and Neal chuckled. "He does know how to make an exit. I'm kind of surprised he didn't grab the wine on his way out."

"Maybe he doesn't trust it not to have Fed cooties." Peter tilted his head and looked at Neal. Really looked at him. Beneath the healing bruises and the lack of attention to grooming, Peter saw something new. Something that hadn't even been there when he first came in. He wasn't sure what it was, but it gave him hope.

"You really don't mind putting the tracker on?"

"No, not really."

"Can I ask why?"

Neal sighed. "When I was in the hospital, there was a Marshal on the door."

"For your protection."

"And to make sure I wasn't going anywhere." He put the tracker back down.

"As if you'd…"

Neal held up a hand, cutting him off. "As things became clearer in my head, after they stopped sedating me, I was glad that there was someone on the door. It meant…" Neal didn't meet his eyes.

"It meant what?"

"It meant that you knew where I was. It meant that I was safe."

Peter sat there, stunned into speechlessness.
"I know what you're thinking. That the tracker won't keep me safe – it's just a bit of plastic that can be cut off with gardening shears. I did it when you signaled me to run. Cowboy Boots did it when he grabbed me."

Peter wondered just what it cost Neal to refer to his kidnapping like that.

Neal continued. "But last night, when I was lying here, alone in my own bed, in a place that has nothing but good memories for me, I couldn't sleep. I felt lost, untethered."

He slowly got up and retrieved something from the bed – a too-familiar stuffed bear, with an oversized button eye and a brass name tag. "I asked Moz to sleep on the couch because I couldn't stop worrying that I'd disappear and no one would find me again. This helped me sleep, a little. This –" Neal touched the tracker, "will help me sleep. A lot."

Peter swallowed hard and tried not to cry. "I didn't want this for you. I wanted you to have your freedom. To do what you want, wherever you want to be."

"Even to rob the Louvre?"

He wiped his eyes. "Even that, Neal. I want you alive and healthy and happy. I want you to have your freedom."

"I am free. This thing doesn't mean I'm not free. I know what it's like to be really chained up. This is nothing like that." Neal picked up the tracker and before Peter could get up and walk around the table, he put it on himself. The lock engaged with a snap and there was a tiny musical beep from the activation.

"Can you check to see that it's online?" Neal looked up at him with such pleading in his eyes that Peter thought he'd do anything to make that look go away.

So he checked his smartphone. "Damn it." The app was asking for information he didn't have.

"What's the matter?"

"I need the new tracker number." He dropped to his knees before Neal and fished out his keys.

Neal asked, "If you don't have the tracker number, how will your key work?"

"It's a new key." Peter had put it on his key ring when he'd gotten the call from the Marshals this morning; he'd entertained the idea of wearing the tracker himself, except that he'd have to deal with the radius. He unlocked the anklet, located the serial number and programmed it into his phone. Then he reluctantly closed the tracker around Neal's ankle.

"Is it working now?"

Peter got up and paced for a few moments. "Yeah, it's online. You're at 79 Riverside Drive, New York, New York."

"Right where I'm supposed to be."

Peter took a deep breath, relieved that Neal wasn't angry about the tracker, but worried that he actually wanted to wear it. "I won't let anything happen to you – not again. Never again."

"I know. I've always known that. You've done your best for me; I've just been the one to mess things up."
"No, Neal." Even as the words left his mouth, he knew they were untrue.

And Neal called him on it. "Come on, Peter. Do I have to run through the list of all the times I fucked up? All the times you covered for me? Protected me?"

Peter shook his head. "No, there's really no need to rehash ancient history."

"No, I guess not." Neal changed the subject. "How's Elizabeth?"

"Good, very good. Worried about you, of course."

"The two of you are okay?"

"Yeah, we are."

"This time, I believe you."

"This time, I believe myself. We talked, finally." This wasn't the time to tell Neal his plans, particularly about his future after the FBI. Neal didn't need that burden.

"You and me – we keep secrets from each other all the time. It's what we do. You and Elizabeth – you can't do that."

Neal sounded so damn earnest, Peter had to laugh. "Okay, Dr. Phil – thank you for the relationship advice."

Neal laughed, too. "God, that brings me back."

"That first night."

"Yup. You were such a dick."

"Neal!" Peter was a little outraged, but he knew it was true. He'd been less than sympathetic about Neal's infatuation with Kate and hadn't hesitated to show it.

"Well, you were."

"I apologized."

"Yes, you did, but you were still a dick."

"Yeah. You're right, I was."

"It's okay." Neal looked down at his hands. "That didn't work out too well. There were times – when I was … when things were really bad, I wished I'd been on that plane when it blew up."

"I'm sorry." Peter didn't know what else to say.

"For what? Holding me back? No, I don't think so. And I'm not sorry you did. I lived, I survived. I'll get better."

Something eased inside Peter, a hard knot of worry. Neal's ability to talk about what had happened to him, even in such a halting fashion, had to be a good sign. And that he was laughing about their shared past was a good thing, too. Maybe they would be all right. Maybe Neal would – eventually – be able to heal.
"I talked to June before I came upstairs. She told me about your visiting nurse schedule. I'm thinking that I can be here around five every day, when she comes. Keep you company – or better yet, you can keep me company. We can have dinner, watch some television. With El in D.C., the evenings are long."

"I could help you solve whatever case you happened to be stuck on."

"That, too. If you want."

"I don't need a minder, Peter."

Rather than making excuses, Peter gave Neal the unvarnished truth. "No, not a minder, but I think you'd do better if you aren't alone all day and if you aren't by yourself when the nurse is here. Not that I think that the nurse will hurt you – but for your own peace of mind. Moz isn't too good with the medical stuff and even though June said she'd be here, I think I should be here, too."

The gratitude in Neal's eyes was enough to break his heart, if it hadn't been broken already. "If you're sure."

"I'm sure."

"Then, okay. Maybe I can have Ida – the nurse – come around five thirty, instead of five. So you don't have to leave early."

"I'm ASAC, I can come and go as I please."

"Come on, Peter – as if you're actually ever off the clock."

Peter wasn't going to mention just how off the clock he'd been for the past six months. "I don't suppose you can have this right now." He nodded towards the wine bottle. "Not with the antibiotics."

"Nope, but soon. It should rest for a while, too." At that, Neal let out a prodigious yawn.

"And speaking of resting…"

"That does sound good." Neal leveraged himself against the table and got to his feet. Peter tried not to seem like he was hovering, but of course he was, as he followed Neal into the bedroom area.

"Can I get you anything?"

"Nah."

"The bear?" Peter glanced back at the table, where Mozart sat next to the bottle of Barolo.

Neal eased down on the bed with a sigh. "No, I think I can give him back to Moz. I have my own security blanket, now." He wiggled his ankle.

"I'll stay for a little while, okay?" Peter turned off the lamp next to the bed.

"Yeah, that's good."

He went over to the couch and found a paperback romance opened on one of the cushions. The cover had a male model with improbable muscles and long flowing hair and a woman, with equally improbable breasts and flowing hair just a tad longer. Peter wondered if it was Mozzie or June who had left this behind.
He put the book to one side, took out his smart phone, turned it on mute, and played a few games of Angry Birds until Neal's breathing had evened out, signaling that he'd fallen into a deep, restful sleep.

Moz was waiting for him at the base of the staircase, practically vibrating with anger and blocking the path to the door. "You are a piece of work, you know that?"

Peter sighed. "I didn't want to put it on him, you know that."

"But you did, anyway."

"I didn't have a choice, Moz."

"There's always a choice, Suit. You just picked the wrong one."

He scrubbed his face, suddenly weary beyond belief. "I'm trying to get Neal's sentence commuted. This is only temporary."

"Like the last time? Your promises regarding Neal's freedom are not very reliable."

"Moz, please." Peter was begging.

"No, you can't placate me. You've done your best to destroy that man upstairs. You've almost succeeded. He actually wants that damn anklet now."

Peter supposed, from Moz's point of view, that nothing could possibly be worse. "I'm sorry. Sorrier than you'll ever understand."

"Words, Suit. Just words."

Peter was about to walk away when he was struck with an idea. It might mean the end of everything, but it might be the only way he'd be able to live with himself. He pulled his keys out of his pocket and unclipped the tracker key.

"No, not just words." He handed the key to Moz. "Give Neal a chance to heal – going on the run in the state he's in isn't wise. He shouldn't fly for a few more weeks, not with the lung injuries. If you're patient, if Neal can be patient, he can leave New York as a free man. If you get him out now, he's always going to be looking over his shoulder."

"Then why are you giving this to me?" Moz closed his fist over the key.

"Because I want you to know that I keep my promises. If something happens and things get fucked up again, I want you to take him and run as far and as fast as you can. The only thing I ask is that you keep him safe and well and out of trouble." Peter felt a little sick at what he'd just done, but he also felt that he'd finally done the right thing.

Moz, though, still had his suspicions. "All it takes is one call and you can have the key reprogrammed."

Peter mentally smacked himself – he hadn't thought of that. "True, but there comes a point when you're either going to have to trust me or you're not. This isn't a scene out of The Princess Bride. You can go upstairs, convince Neal to take the tracker off and spend the next few weeks moving it around the city until Neal's well enough to leave. Or you can rely on my promise not to have the key reprogrammed."
Some of the hostility faded from Moz's expression. "I'll take your position under advisement. If Neal wants to stay, we'll stay. If he wants to go, we'll go. I won't push him to do anything he doesn't want to do, but I can be persuasive."

Peter understood. "I know. But as long as you do what's really best for Neal, I have nothing more to say."

Moz gave him a terse nod and stepped aside, giving Peter a clear path to the door. If it was only that simple.

..................................................

Neal looked at the key Moz gave him.

Once upon a time, he wouldn't have hesitated to use it. Once upon a time, he would have run and damned the consequences.

Or maybe not.

He'd had a key like this once upon a time and he hadn't used it then – at least not to run.

Moz would never understand, but the tracker wasn't a shackle or an unbearable weight. Not anymore. Right now, it was a lifeline. Neal hadn't lied to Peter. He needed to know that Peter could always find him. Would always find him. No matter what.

Nothing else mattered.
Sometime in Late April – Friday Afternoon

Peter glanced at the clock, it was well after five and he needed to get going. Neal had a physical therapy appointment at seven and it was going to take time and patience to get him downstairs and outside.

Physically, Neal had made tremendous progress. Over the past three months, the wounds from his ordeal and the subsequent surgeries had healed and the scars from many of the visible wounds had started to fade. But it was the multitude of invisible wounds that were refusing to heal. The damage to Neal's psyche seemed irreparable.

"It looks that spring has finally sprung. Want to go to the park?"

Neal looked up from the book he was reading. "Nah. Don't feel up to it."

"Your physical therapist said you need to walk, get exercise. Rebuild your muscles." Peter tried to sound casual.

"I know, but not today."

"The sun is shining, it's almost seventy degrees. After this winter, it seems like a miracle. I think I even saw some daffodils blooming."

"That's nice." Neal sounded thoroughly bored.

"You could use some fresh air."

"I'm just fine here." Neal put his book down. "I don't feel like going out right now."

Peter said gently, giving voice to the rising concerns he'd swallowed over the past few weeks, "You never feel like going out. You don't leave the apartment unless you absolutely have to. That's not the Neal Caffrey I know and love."

Neal whispered something that Peter didn't think he was supposed to hear, "I think that Neal Caffrey died."

His cell phone buzzed, distracting him from the bleak thoughts. He didn't recognize the number. "Hello?"

"Peter, it's Landon."

His heart skipped a beat. They'd spoken a few times since Neal had gotten out of the hospital. Landon had called to thank him for his generous donation. At El's insistence, he'd doubled the amount she'd asked him to contribute. She called again to let him know that she was still working on getting the U.S. Attorney General to sign off on a full commutation, and if he would be interested in having her start the paperwork for a pardon for Neal. That would take years, but it wouldn't be much more work than what she was doing now.

Peter had told her he'd discuss it with Neal, and he had. Neal seemed highly disinterested and Peter told Landon not to bother. She then told him that the next time he heard from her, she'd be calling with good news.
He swallowed against the sudden dryness in his throat. "Well?"

"It's done. The Attorney General has signed the papers releasing Neal Caffrey from his continuing obligations as a felon on work release. In recognition of his service, the balance of his sentence – all three months of it – have been commuted. Neal Caffrey is a free man."

"Thank god. Thank you, Landon." Peter chuckled at the unintentional humor of his words.

To Peter's surprise, she didn't laugh with him. "Peter …"

The way she said his name, with a combination of pity and concern, made him ask, "What's the catch?" But he had a feeling he knew the answer.

"This didn't come cheaply. I tried to keep you out of it, but I couldn't. That's why it's taken so long."

"What do they want?" Peter didn't even know why he was asking.

"I'm sorry, but they want your badge. You have your twenty and will be able to retire at full pension and retirement benefits. But you'll have to go. I am sorry."

In a way, Peter was relieved. It would be easier if he was asked to go rather than make the decision himself. "It's okay. This isn't unexpected. I burned a lot of bridges when Neal disappeared. And even more when he was found."

"Your boss didn't want this, just so you know. He fought as hard as I did."

"Bruce is a good man, he deserves better than what I've put him through." That wasn't precisely the truth, but it was appropriate for the moment. Bruce had been among the first to insist that Neal had run and had stonewalled his efforts to find him, but he'd come around once he'd seen the damage those animals had done to Neal.

"I've forwarded a copy of the signed paperwork to you. It should be in your email now."

Peter looked at his computer and yes, there was a message from Landon. "Got it." He opened the attachment – a letter and a legal document from the Bureau of Prisons, signed and sealed by Eric Holder, the U.S. Attorney General, affirming the commutation of Neal's sentence, effective today.

"I don't know when they'll get around to requesting your resignation, but I think it will be soon."

Landon paused. "I want to remind you of my offer. I know we'd work well together. I need someone with principles like yours. Someone who can remind me that it's more than a game. That people aren't simply marks on a scorecard."

"I'll think about it."

"Please do."

"I need to go, but I'll catch up with you soon."

"You probably want to go tell Neal the good news. If traffic isn't too bad, you might even beat the Marshals to his place."

"What?" Peter was shocked. "Why would the Marshals be going to see Neal?"

"To collect the tracker. Valuable government property."

"Are you joking?"
"No, I'm not. Is this a problem?"

"U.S. Marshals dropping in on Neal without warning, after everything he's been through? Given their history with Neal, of course it's a problem."

"Ah, yes. Well, then you'd better go."

Peter hung up, having the distinct feeling that Landon was amused by his concern. He shut down his computer and took a quick look at the pile of files that needed his attention, and realized that they didn't matter anymore. This part of his life was almost over. He grabbed his jacket and sprinted down the stairs. Jones approached with a folder but Peter waved him off. "Not now, got to run."

"Okay, this can wait until Monday."

"Thanks."

The trip uptown felt like it was taking twice as long as it usually did, even for a Friday evening at rush hour. It was close to six-thirty when he pulled up behind a nondescript gray Ford sedan with U.S. government plates.

"Damn it." He took a deep breath and fought for control. Barging in on a situation, one that should be happy for everyone, with a temper wasn't a good idea. But his hands were shaking as he rang the doorbell. June herself answered and she had a very worried look on her face.

"I was just about to call you, Peter."

"There are Marshals here?"

"Yes, and they won't tell me what they want with Neal."

"They haven't gone upstairs?"

"I wouldn't let them. They don't have a warrant."

"It's okay. Let me talk to them."

June led him into the front parlor. The waiting Marshals looked up expectantly and Peter introduced himself. He also admonished them. "I am Mr. Caffrey's handler; you should have contacted me first before coming over."

The younger of the pair, a woman who looked about Neal's age, gave her partner a look that all but screamed I told you so. She held out her hand. "I'm Corrine Williams and this is Arty Jenks. We got the orders to retrieve Mr. Caffrey's tracker about an hour ago."

"And you should have called me before turning up at a private home."

"You'd think that Caffrey would be happy to see us," Jenks muttered.

"He would be, if you didn't just show up." Peter turned to June. "Let me go up and talk to Neal, make sure he's okay. Either we'll come down or I'll let you know if you can send one of them up."

Peter thought he heard Jenks mutter something about pain in the ass special snowflakes, but he didn't pursue it. Punching a U.S. Marshal wasn't how he wanted to end his career.

He went upstairs and found Neal sitting by the French doors, a sketchpad in his lap. The page, though, was blank. Neal was dressed in wool pants and a turtleneck sweater – not exactly the best
attire for physical therapy. This was one of the many ways he'd taken to evading Peter's efforts to get to therapy.

But that wasn't what mattered right now.

"What's going on? I heard some commotion downstairs."

"A few unexpected visitors." Peter sat down next to Neal. He licked his lips. "I heard from a friend today."

"Oh?" Neal displayed the same amount of interest in Peter's statement as he did when Peter asked him if he wanted to go outside.

"Yeah. Remember Landon Shepherd?"

That got Neal's interest piqued. "Of course I do. I'm surprised you consider her a friend."

Peter made a noncommittal sound. "She's helped me with something."

"Should I be jealous? I'd have to think that her services cost more than seven hundred a month."

During the evenings that Peter spent with Neal, they discussed a few cases and despite everything that had happened to him, despite his on-going problems, Neal still had the power to stun him with his insight. Insight that helped him close more than a half-dozen cases.

"No need to be jealous. She hasn't provided that kind of help." Peter wasn't sure why this was making him so nervous, maybe because he hated talking about those days. "I called her, back when you were found, when your status was uncertain."

"You mean back when the Justice Department wanted to toss me back in prison."

"Yeah."

"Peter, you didn't go to her for help?" Neal seemed both outraged and worried. "Do you have any idea what it will cost you?"

"It's okay, Neal. It's costing me nothing more than what I'm willing to pay."

Neal shook his head. "She's a shark, she's going to sink her teeth in you and never let go."

"I've gotten to know her a little better, and I don't think that's really the case."

Neal's expression screamed doubt, but he didn't say anything more.

"Anyway, I heard from Landon today. The AG has signed off on your commutation. You're a free man, Neal."

Neal blinked at the momentous news.

"I haven't gotten the chance to print out the paperwork, but I've seen it." He fished out his Blackberry and called up Landon's email. The attachment was barely legible, but barely was just enough. "Here."

Neal took the phone from him and looked at the document. "I don't know what to say. Does thank you work?"
Peter smiled slightly and shook his head. "There's nothing to say. I promised you your freedom, and I'm a man of my word."

"Yes, you are." Neal handed the phone back to him. "Freedom." He stretched his left leg out. "What if I don't want to give this back?"

"I don't think you have a choice, Neal. The visitors downstairs? It's the Marshals. They've come to collect the tracker."

That earned him a laugh. "Seriously? They sent the Marshals for this?"

"Yup. Apparently the tracker is valuable government property and needs to be reclaimed as quickly as possible. Do you want to go down or should I have one of them come up?"

"You could take it off, you know."

"I could, but I don't have the key," he reminded Neal.

For a while, Peter hadn't been sure that Moz had told Neal that he'd given him the key. For the first few weeks, Peter had come each evening and expected Neal to be gone. After the third week, when Neal caught him checking his ankle, he'd finally mentioned it.

"I'm not sure that giving this to Moz was such a good idea. He might try to hack the entire system." Neal had retrieved the key from the bowl of fresh fruit that had always graced his dining table and handed it over to Peter.

Peter had pushed it back to Neal. "Hold onto it, you never know what tomorrow brings."

That was the one and only time they'd talked about it.

Now, Neal got up and went over to a small painting by his bed – one of the many hidden compartments in this place. He came back with the key. "Here. If you're going to take it off, do it now. Before I change my mind."

As threats went, that one was a little ridiculous, but Peter didn't point that out. He knelt and lifted the cuff of Neal's trousers. "For the very last time." He sighed and was almost moved to tears. For all the times he'd imagined this moment, he'd never imagined it would happen like this. "There should be cake. And champagne."

"And balloons and silly hats?"

"And silly hats." He put the key in the slot. The lock disengaged and the light went out. Peter pulled the tracker away. "Let me give this to the Marshals and get them out of June's parlor. You have a physical therapist appointment tonight."

"Maybe I can skip it? After all, we have something to celebrate."

It was a good excuse and while Peter knew that giving in tonight would only make it easier to giving in the next time, maybe Neal earned a reprieve. "Okay. I'll let you call the therapist's office. But no getting out of Monday's appointment."

Neal was dialing when Peter left the apartment. June was still sitting with the Marshals, Bugsy in her arms. The little dog was growling, just loud enough to set the hair up on the back of Peter's neck. Williams and Jenks stood as he entered the room. "Here, this is what you came for." He handed Williams the anklet and the key. "I presume there's paperwork that needs to be signed?"
Jenks pulled a sheaf of papers out of his jacket. "Yeah – Caffrey's got to initial the release forms. Any reason why he won't come down?"

Peter took the papers and ignored the question. He looked them over; the papers were nothing more than a standard release, that all property had been returned and there were no claims against the U.S. Marshals Service. "I'll have these signed, copied and sent back to you on Monday."

Jenks looked like he was about to argue but Williams simply said, "That will be fine."

"Then you're done here. There's the door. Don't come back." Peter didn't care how rude he sounded.

Jenks, though, wasn't going to let Peter have the last word. "Not without a warrant."

June took control of the moment. "I need you to leave my home now." She marched to the front door, still holding Bugsy, whose growls were becoming steadily more audible, and opened it. The two Marshals finally left and Peter breathed a sigh of relief.

"Did that just happen? Did they just take Neal's tracker back?" June seemed as flabbergasted as Peter felt.

He nodded. "I got the word about five-thirty that Neal's sentence had been commuted. It was quite a shock to hear that the Marshals Service was sending agents to come here and retrieve the tracker today."

"I think we need to celebrate. If Neal's up to it." June was all too aware of Neal's reluctance to leave the apartment. "Maybe just a small party here."

"Sounds like a good idea. Let me go ask him." Peter gestured for June to precede him.

Neal wasn't sure what to feel. Once, he longed for this moment. He'd dreamed about the day the tracker came off for good. So many different scenarios had played out in his mind. After the debacle with the treasure and Keller and the notice from the Commutation Board, he'd dreamed of a career with the FBI, that he'd be an agent in all but name.

That version of the dream lasted only as long as it took for Philip Kramer to run roughshod over his rights.

He'd had some idea of staying with the Bureau after he came back to New York, more as a freelancer – someone who had the expertise to solve the unsolvable. He'd had yearned for a role that would keep him within Peter's orbit, because no matter how much he ached for his freedom, he couldn't quite bear the idea of a permanent separation from Peter Burke.

But that dream had also died – in a moment of bitter resentment and angry words. The months after Peter's release from prison were filled with self-disgust and loathing. He loved Peter, the man was his family in ways that were impossible to define. Moz might have taught him how to live, but Peter had taught him how to be a man. Peter respected him.

And then he didn't.

When that happened, all of the dreams, all of the inchoate longings of a life to be lived in the orbit of Peter Burke vanished. Like an ice cube on the sidewalk in July.

He hadn't blamed Peter for his anger, but the unreasonable child inside of him had wanted Peter to
understand just what he'd sacrificed for him, just what his cooperation with Hagen was costing him. He didn't want to have to tell Peter, he wanted Peter to **see.** And of course Peter hadn't.

So he'd demanded his freedom. He might have led Moz to believe he'd gone through all of his resources, but that was far from the truth. He had more money that he knew what to do with, and had thought, once the tracker was off for good, that he'd have the rest of his life to enjoy it. Crime would be just a hobby, not a means to an end.

*And look how well that had turned out …*

Neal stood in front of the French doors leading out to the terrace and watched the spring breeze tease the planters, the tubs filled with just-blooming flowers. It was so enticing and so terrible. A big part of him ached to go back out into the world, but he couldn't. He was too frightened. There was too much risk, too much chance that someone would want him to do something, want his talents for their own twisted ends.

And now that Peter had taken the tracker off, there was no way he could watch out for him, make sure he was where he was supposed to be, doing the things he was supposed to be doing.

He'd have to trust that Peter would be able to keep track of him.

*Trust.* Such a funny thing between them.

He never forgot the words he'd said to Peter that day, when he'd been stoned to the gills.

"*Out of all the people in my life, Mozzie, even Kate, you know, you're the only one.*"

Peter hadn't understood. "*The only one what?*

"*The only person in my life I trust.*"

What a terrible burden he'd placed on Peter's shoulders. Especially when their relationship was defined by a lack of trust. He was a con man, a professional liar, a thief. Peter was an FBI agent, a man who was the living embodiment of Fidelity, Bravery and Integrity.

Another memory teased at his brain. A dark room, but not the cell where he'd been kept and tortured. There were noises – mechanical pings and whooshes, the sound of people coming and going, both outside the room and in it. He hadn't been restrained, but there were lines holding him down.

It was a memory from the hospital. But why was he remembering this now?

The cop – Benson – was there. He'd seen her a few times since he'd come home, but that wasn't relevant. What was relevant was the memory of Peter standing behind her, wearing an expression of terrible hope that shone from his face despite the dim light.

Neal wiped his mouth, feeling slightly nauseous. It felt like he'd been trying to recall this memory for a while. In conversations with Peter, with the psychiatrist at the hospital, conversations with Moz and June and Elizabeth. It had been there, haunting him.

He rested his head against the glass and when he stopped fighting it, he could hear himself screaming.

*“This is your fault. Your fault!”* Neal could hear himself screaming and the pain was a thing trying to rip itself out of his gut. *“You did this, you bastard. You forgot about me and left me to die!”*
No, no – he couldn't have said that to Peter, he couldn't have blamed Peter for what had happened to him. For not finding him.

But he did. He had. The memory was true and as painful as any of the tortures inflicted on him.

He knew that Peter had never stopped looking for him. Clinton and Diana had told him that Peter had all but abandoned his own career to look for him, using resources he'd been directed not to use, constantly fighting with his own boss, with the brass in D.C., insisting that he – Neal – hadn't run.

Neal could only imagine how he'd hurt Peter with those accusations.

Then another piece of the puzzle fell into place. Peter's mysterious absence the first few days after his recovery. He had asked everyone where Peter was, he'd been hurt that Peter hadn't come to see him. Hughes had said that things were complicated for Peter and he had to stay away for a while, but Neal hadn't been so far gone that he couldn't smell the bullshit.

And then Peter was there and the hurt vanished. It seemed like from that moment forward, he'd started to heal.

The glass, hard and unyielding, warmed against his forehead. But he didn't step away. The world was so close – a few millimeters away. Why couldn't he just open the door and go outside?

Behind him, the door opened. He still didn't move. He knew who was there, who would always be there, no matter what he did, no matter how badly he behaved. At that moment, he hated Peter. Hated the burden of trust, of friendship, of obligation.

"Neal? Are you okay?"

He turned, at last. "You're such a fucking saint, Peter Burke. Always here, always saving me, no matter what I do, no matter how badly I fuck things up."

"Neal? What's the matter?"

And there it was, the hurt, the fear, the love. He could hear it so clearly. "I remember."

June was there too. He could bear her love. "Neal?"

"Please go, June. I need to talk to Peter."

She looked from him to Peter and back to him. "I'll be downstairs, call if you need me." The door closed quietly behind her as she left.

Peter asked, "What do you remember?"

He licked his lips, trying to control the flood of emotions. "What I said to you."

Peter's face collapsed into lines of deep grief. "I hoped you never would. I hoped that you'd just forget, or chalk it up to a bad drug-induced dream."

"How could you forgive me?"

"What?"

Neal repeated, "How could you forgive me for what I said? I blamed you for what happened. For not finding me. I was horrible and cruel."
"You were in pain, Neal. You'd been through something so terrible I still can't wrap my brain around it. Whatever you said that night doesn't matter. I've forgotten it."

"You have? I don't believe you. How can you?" Neal didn't hold back the venom. Which was so strange. What right did he have to be angry?

Peter didn't answer him. Ironically, he went over to the French doors, where he'd just had his own epiphany.

"Peter?"

"Maybe because everything you said was true."

"What do you mean?"

"I failed you."

Neal's anger – as foolish and unreasonable as it was – disappeared. "How can you say that? You looked for me, I know you did. You were never going to find me, they made sure of that."

Peter sighed. "I know, but that's not where everything went wrong. When you ran, after I signaled you that day, I should have let you go. I should have never tried to find you. If I hadn't found you, you'd be safe and free and no one would have kidnapped you."

Neal couldn't believe what he was hearing. "You really think that all of this is your fault?"

And Peter nodded. "Ellen would still be alive. Hell, so would Terrance Pratt. Nothing that happened over the last fifteen months would have occurred if I'd just let you go."

Neal still couldn't believe that Peter thought this. "You came after me because Collins was on my tail. He would have killed me and brought back my body as a trophy."

"If I hadn't convinced Ellen to send you that text, you never would have called her. We never would have talked. I never would have been able to pin down your location. Collins would never have found that map and …" Peter shook his head. "You were right that night. It was my fault."

Neal buried his face in his hands. "I can't deal with your guilt, Peter."

"I'm not asking you to. We've always had a problem with the truth, you and me. You wouldn't lie to my face but you had no problem with going around my back. For my part, I did a grand job of keeping important things from you. I swore that I'd never do that again. You asked me how I could forgive you for your words, and I told you. Maybe I should have sugar coated it, but I'm not really all that good with that. I'm a dick, remember?"

"Not funny, Peter."

"Look, Neal – there's no point to this. Whatever you said that night was important for a moment, for a few days. It's not important now. Do I really believe that I have some culpability in what happened to you? Yes I do, and I don't think I'll ever feel otherwise."

Neal felt a curious sort of rage. It wasn't a deep burning anger, but something worse, something bitter and corrosive. "Two years ago, you stood there – probably in that exact same spot – and told me that I wasn't responsible for Elizabeth's kidnapping. Matthew Keller was. Were you lying then or are you lying now?"
"I don't think it's a matter of truth or lies, Neal. It's how I feel and I can't change that. Just as I can't change the fact that I'd missed my friend more than I thought possible and when I got the chance to find you and bring you home, I jumped on it. Call it misplaced guilt, but it's the truth."

Neal knew he was behaving like a child, but for the first time in months, it seemed like he felt real – that his emotions weren't driven by fear. He felt alive. "And everything you've done for me since the hospital, all the ways you've helped me get back on my feet, to find 'Neal Caffrey' again, is that because you've felt guilty?"

Peter looked like he'd been slapped. "How can you even ask that?"

"Because – " Neal took a deep breath. "Because it feels like that, sometimes. Because all I've done is wreck your life. I've wondered, more than once, why you keep coming back here. Now I think I understand why."

Peter felt like he could shatter with one well-placed blow. "You're wrong, Neal. You're my friend and that's the only reason why I've done what I've done."

The skepticism in Neal's eyes made him feel sick. That Neal could believe this of him. That he was acting out of a sense of obligation, not friendship. Not love.

But maybe it was his fault. He should have ripped a page out of Neal's playbook and deflected. He should never have told him how guilty he'd felt.

His head hurt. His heart hurt. So he did the only thing he could do, he retreated. "Maybe we both need a little distance."

"Some perspective?" Neal's comment was a deliberate allusion to that terrible moment last year, after Peter had come over with a new tracker and a heart filled with suspicions.

"No, just a little time. We've been just about living on top of each other the past few weeks and I think it might be a good idea for both of us to take a breather."

Neal nodded. "You should go to D.C., go see Elizabeth."

"Yeah, good idea." El was supposed to be coming up tomorrow morning, but it would be easy enough to change those tickets.

Instead of celebrating Neal's release, he'd have a quiet weekend with Elizabeth. They'd continue with the house hunting. He wasn't quite ready yet – even after what had just happened between them – to give up the idea that they'd find a place for the three of them, a place that Neal could call home base, if he ever left New York.

If he ever left this apartment.

"You're right, Peter. I think we need a break."

To Peter's astonishment, Neal went to the door and opened it, gesturing for him to leave.

A dozen different thoughts crowded on his tongue, things like reminders about upcoming doctor and therapist appointments, about getting a little fresh air – even if just on the terrace – about remembering to eat enough. But the only thing he could say was, "The Marshals left these for your signature." He pulled the packet of papers from his back pocket. "Sign them and send them over to
the office. I'll also have a copy of your discharge papers sent here – you should keep a copy."

It was illogical and stupid to feel like this was going to be the last time he'd see Neal, but there seemed something too final about this moment.

Neal continued to hold the door open, his face set in angry, almost mulish lines. Peter tapped the papers and just said, "Take care of yourself, Neal. Please." He left and the door closed behind him with an emphatic thud.

June was waiting for him in the front parlor. "Is everything all right?"

He shrugged. "I don't know."

"Are you all right?"

Peter managed to summon a smile at her misplaced concern. "I'm fine. I'll be gone for a few days, though."

"I'll keep an eye on Neal."

"Thank you."

"There's nothing to thank me for, Peter."

Peter wasn't sure he agreed with that. "Can you do a favor for me?"

"Anything."

Another time, he might have made a quip that she should know better than to make such rash promises. This time, he just asked, "If Neal leaves – "

"Leaves the apartment?"

"No, if he leaves for good, don't stop him. Don't even ask where he's going. Just let me know when he's gone."

"Peter!" June was stunned by his request.

"Neal has no reason to stay, now."

"Except that he can't seem to walk out his apartment door." June snapped uncharacteristically. "He's not going anywhere, Peter."

Peter shook his head, not so certain of that. "But just in case he does, let me know."

"I will." Her agreement was laced with skepticism.

"Thank you, June. Thank you for everything." He kissed her cheek and wondered if this was another last time.

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"Neal?"

June hadn't bothered to knock.

He stared out onto the terrace. The sun was almost completely lost behind the skyline. The shadows
outside seemed even more threatening than usual. "Has Peter left?"

"Yes, and we had the most unusual conversation."

"Oh?" Neal couldn't begin to imagine what Peter had told her.

"Peter seems to think that you are going to leave New York. And he has the distinct impression that you're going to leave without telling him. Without saying goodbye." There was just a touch of censure in her voice.

"I've done it before."

"Before, things were different. You were running away. You have no reason to run now." She looked down at his ankle. "You're a free man."

"But not exactly free, June." Neal sighed and flopped into a chair. "I picked a fight with Peter."

"I gathered, from your comment when I came upstairs before."

"I accused him of taking care of me because he felt guilty about what had happened to me."

"And do you really believe that?"

"Sometimes it seems like the only plausible explanation. I've done a pretty good job of wrecking his life. Sometimes I can't fathom why Peter keeps coming back."

"Because he loves you, Neal. Because he's your friend."

"Moz is my friend, too."

"Moz will go to the wall for you, but he can't change a bandage. He'll bring you wine, but he'll forget the food. His friendship is constrained by his own emotional limitations. He can't give you the support that Peter can."

"I all but kicked him out. We should have been celebrating and I treated him like shit." A bubble of bitter laughter escaped. "What else is new?"

"You can still celebrate, Neal. This is a terrific milestone, even if you can't appreciate it right now."

"Maybe when Peter gets back. He's going to D.C., to see Elizabeth."

June sat down next to him. "I know things seem very bleak right now; I know that you feel like everything you want is just out of reach. But that will change, trust me."

He nodded. "One part of me wants to run – to get out of here so fast I'd leave scorch marks on the floor. But another part just wants to stay and have back the life I used to dream of. But I can't have that either. Not when I can't walk out that door without some pretty steady coaxing and some serious medication."

June squeezed his hand. "Give it time, Neal."

The problem was that time was the only thing he had.

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Sometime in Late April – Wednesday Afternoon
"I can't believe they're doing this to you, Peter." Clinton stood in the doorway, hands on his hips, an angry expression on his face.

"They're not doing anything to me. This was my decision."

"That's bullshit, boss, and we all know it," Diana chimed in from her position against the wall. "Caffrey gets his release and three days later, you're retiring? It stinks like the far side of Staten Island in July."

Clinton continued with the refrain. "Peter, we all know that when agents of your stature retire, it doesn't happen overnight, or within a few days. There's succession planning, an orderly transfer of responsibilities. This is like when Hughes was pushed out."

"I'm asking you to drop it, both of you."

Diana caught the hole in his request. "Ah, so you admit there's something to drop."

Peter sighed, defeated by his friends' well-meaning concern. "Come in and shut the door."

Clinton sat down but Diana maintained her position, arms folded across her chest.

"Yes, I was 'asked' to retire. But even if that hadn't happened, I still would have left. I was only waiting out the rest of Neal's sentence."

"You're kidding me, right? You're giving up your career for Caffrey?" Diana's outrage was like a furnace blast. "I don't believe it – after everything you've fought for – you're just throwing it away?"

"I'm not throwing anything away, Di. Elizabeth has built a good life in D.C., and it's time that I joined her there."

"So why not transfer?"

"For the same reason why I didn't go to D.C. in the first place. I'm not a bureaucrat. Besides, the brass wants me gone. I've ruffled too many feathers."

Clinton kept shaking his head, like he didn't believe this was actually happening.

"I'm done, guys. I don't expect you to understand it, but please believe me when I say that I'm happy with this." He had reasons for this happiness. It was more than simply saying goodbye to a part of his life that was no longer able to bring him pleasure. But he wasn't quite ready to share those reasons. Not even with these two, not quite yet.

"You know, I think I believe you." Diana pushed away from the wall and stared into his face. "I really do think you're happy about this."

"Thank you, Diana. That means a lot to me."

Clinton still seemed stubborn, and hung back when Diana left the office. "I don't know, Peter. The man I've worked with for almost a decade wasn't a quitter."

Peter raised his eyebrows at that. "I'm not quitting. I'm retiring. I have my twenty – you know what that means."

Clinton sighed. "Yeah. That puts you at the top of the list when it comes to budget cuts and regime changes. But your record – "
"My record stands. And so does yours."

"What do you mean?"

Peter smiled. "I know you're a little young, but I think that's what this office needs. I've put your name in for ASAC here."

"Peter! That's ridiculous. That's – "

He held up a hand. "It's not ridiculous. You're a born leader, Clinton Jones, and it's time that the FBI recognized that. There's no one more qualified for this seat than you. I don't know if my recommendation has any value, considering everything that's happened, but if it does, and they do ask, take it."

"Why me? Why not Diana?"

Peter shook his head slightly. "Diana's not the agent you are."

Clinton opened his mouth to interrupt but Peter held up a hand.

"She's a brilliant agent, but she's not a leader – yet. You know how to see potential, nurture talent. Diana's not quite there."

"Okay. Okay." Clinton rubbed his mouth. "I'll need to think about this. I'm not so sure I'm there yet, either."

"I disagree." He reminded Clinton, "They may never ask."

"I know, but if they do…"

"Take it."

Clinton held out his hand and Peter grabbed it, pulling him into a brief hug. "You'll do fine. Trust me."

Clinton nodded, looking like he was about to cry, and left the office.

Peter looked around, checking that he'd put all his personal items in the box he'd brought with him. Photos of El, check. "World's Greatest ASAC" coffee mug, check. Diplomas and commendations, check. He looked in his drawers and found his Quantico pen, the one he'd taken back from Neal, and put that into his jacket pocket. And from underneath the gun safe, Peter pulled out a file filled with bits and pieces of Neal – origami animals, notes that didn't go into case files, a photo of the entire team making the two-figure summoning gesture. Neal had printed it out and added obscene comments. In Latin.

He sighed, feeling a lot less sad than he expected he'd feel at this moment. This office had never felt comfortable, not like the smaller one on the other side of the conference room. There was no point in lingering.

He'd gotten word on Monday – Bruce had come up from D.C. to deliver the news personally. Tuesday, he filed his paperwork and had his exit interview. This morning, they'd punched holes in his badges and took away his ID. He told Diana and Clinton privately, before making his farewell speech, which he'd kept to a minimum. His assistant, Andrea, was more than a little distressed. She said that she was ready to throw in the towel, too. She didn't have it in her to go through another regime change.
The entire office stood as he walked down the stairs for the last time, and he made it a point to shake everyone's hand, and it seemed like they all waited with him at the elevator. It finally arrived and Peter had to say something, if just to make the moment a little less awkward.

"Like I said before, it's been an honor and a pleasure working with you. Take care."

The doors closed and he breathed a sigh of relief.

This was it. The end. And a beginning.
Chapter 30

Sometime in Late April – Wednesday Afternoon

Neal's cell phone buzzed with an incoming text. It was Peter.

You doing okay?

He responded quickly. I'm fine.

Feel like a visit tonight?

He hadn't seen Peter since Friday night, since their argument, or whatever it actually was. Because an argument takes two people, and he was the only one who was angry. And although Peter had stayed away – he'd gone to D.C. for the weekend and been back since early Monday morning – he hadn't cut off communications.

The first email arrived about an hour after Peter had left the apartment – just long enough to go home to that empty house in Brooklyn. The message was short and it made Neal laugh and cry at the same time. It was a picture of the infamous "grumpy cat" with the caption, Sun is out, flowers are blooming, sky is blue. Go fuck yourself. Underneath the macro was a simple message, "Call me if you need me. Or, even if you don't need me."

Neal hadn't called, but he emailed back, with an equally silly dog GIF – a six month old golden retriever puppy endlessly chasing its tail and falling on its face. He hadn't included a message, but that hadn't stopped Peter from responding with another ridiculous cat picture. The silly emails had continued through the weekend, punctuated by the occasional text.

On Monday, Peter had asked if he could stop by. Neal had put him off, and Peter hadn't pressed. Nor had he reminded him about his physical therapy appointment that night. He got another text on Tuesday with a similar request. Again, he told Peter he wasn't up for company, and had been surprised that Peter had actually respected his request. He was certain that Peter would just show up and had even texted back, around eight that evening, asking if everything was okay. It was. Peter had gone home and that had been that.

Now, Neal was debating whether to tell Peter to come by. The evenings were long. Moz had been in residence over the weekend, but on Monday, he'd taken off for Boston or Detroit or Trenton, someplace that needed his attention. Moz hadn't been too clear on the wheres or whys; all he said was that he needed to go out of town, but he was reachable if necessary.

It had been three days, and Neal missed Moz, except that he didn't miss the constant push to leave New York, which had become incessant since the tracker came off. June was a soothing presence, never urging him to do more than keep his doctors' appointments and take care of himself. Moz, though, didn't want to accept Neal's limitations and Neal was tired of listening to him make plans that were never going to happen.

His phone pinged again. Neal?

As lonely as he was, Neal wasn't sure he was ready to see Peter. Not 2nite sorry

Okay

The texts stopped and Neal figured that Peter was heading into a meeting. Maybe he'd bite the bullet
and call him tonight. They could talk about things; maybe Peter could run some of his current cases by him. Neal missed that. And he missed Peter's gentle, relentless pressure to do everything he needed to do to heal physically and psychologically. The love – and he knew it was love, not guilt – was like a soft down comforter.

If only he could just step outside.

Sometime in Late April – Early Friday Afternoon

It was strange to be so footloose.

This wasn't like that difficult interval after he'd been suspended for punching Fowler, when it all went to shit on the runway. Then, he was focused on getting his badge back and getting Neal out of jail. He hadn't really had time to just relax and take it easy.

Not that he really was relaxing and taking it easy.

Wednesday, after leaving the office for the last time, he'd texted Neal and asked if he was up for a visit. Neal had taken a few minutes to respond and Peter had hoped that it was a good sign, that he'd say yes, and give him the green light to resume their friendship.

No, that wasn't right. They were still friends and the meltdown on Friday was really nothing worse than any of the other hiccups in their relationship. When he'd told Elizabeth about what had happened, she said it was a good sign – that Neal was finally pushing back at him. El was right, Neal had become very passive-aggressive and he'd been expending a lot of energy trying to get Neal to take some action.

El suggested that he let Neal set the pace, as long as he kept in contact with him. She said he shouldn't let more than a few hours go by without reaching out, as casually as possible, but not to push things. That was a hard bit of advice to follow, especially when he'd made a career out of pushing things, especially with Neal.

And it was hard to believe his career was officially over. He wasn't unhappy about it and he had no regrets, but it was just a little strange not to get up in the morning, dress in a suit and tie, clip his badge on his belt, get his gun out of the safe and drive to work. It had only been two days, he still had to get used to all of this free time.

Or more accurately, all of this unstructured time, because it wasn't as if he was lazing around the house, watching early season Yankees games.

There were plenty of things he had to do.

And he wanted to do none of them right now. The house was clean, the dog was washed, there was food in the fridge for the weekend – El would be home tomorrow morning. Bills were paid; all of the accumulated papers from the last few months were sorted and filed. Yesterday had been all about efficiency.

Today was all about planning for the future.

He'd finished reading the paperwork for the mortgage pre-qualification, filled in some numbers, did some calculations, redid those calculations without El's salary, and confirmed that they didn't have to sell this house to afford the property they were considering in Maryland. Of course, it would be easier if they rented this place. If everything worked out as they hoped, they would do that for a few
years, and then sell it when the time was right.

It was really amazing how much cheaper everything was in Maryland, and even in Northern Virginia, at least compared to New York. He and El had bought this place a few years before Brooklyn became Hipster Central and the price of residential real estate went nuts. They could easily get several million for the house now, despite the lack of a first floor bathroom.

The place they were most interested in, the one they'd seen last weekend, had four bedrooms, four baths, a pool and best of all, a small, completely finished guesthouse. It would be perfect for Neal.

But until he talked to Neal, until he got the sense that leaving New York permanently was a possibility, none of this paperwork mattered. And based on what Elizabeth had said this past weekend, if Neal wasn't interested in having a place with them in D.C., if he felt he'd never be able to leave New York, she was going to leave her job at the National Gallery and resume her life here.

Peter was fine with either decision, although the place in Maryland was really nice. They could even have horses.

The alarm on his phone buzzed, reminding Peter that he needed to connect with Neal. He thought about calling, but he still wasn't sure that was a good idea. Neal was comfortable with his emails and the texts, calling might still be too much.

*Miss you. Up for company tonight?*

Peter pressed "send" and put the phone down, willing himself not to hold onto it while he waited for Neal's answer.

*Miss you. Up for company tonight?*

Neal looked at his phone and bit his lip. He missed Peter, too. And this self-imposed separation seemed stupid and pointless now.

It was so beautiful outside – the perfect spring day in New York. Bright blue sky, high clouds drifting lazily in the breeze; and the birds – they were going crazy after the almost endless winter. Their chirping began at dawn and continued through the day, a riot of sound that Neal had always loved. In earlier years, he'd have his first cup of coffee out on the terrace and listen to the birdsong. First were the city sparrows, more cheeping than tuneful. The pigeons would start with their mournful cooing, and then the rest of the flock – the cardinals and warblers and other denizens of the nearby park – would soon join in.

One memorable March morning two years ago, he'd even seen a bald eagle soaring on the rising thermals. A much smaller falcon – probably one of the local peregrines – went after it, fiercely defending its territory. The eagle flapped its wings, screamed once, and wheeled away, not interested in going into battle over the local pigeon population.

Nature, red in tooth and claw, was never all that far away. Not even here in Manhattan. He missed it. He missed so damn much. Just going out to the corner coffee shop for an espresso. Or for a walk with June. A visit to the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Or the Whitney. Or even the Rubin, all the way downtown. It used to be just on the outer edge of his radius, but he didn't have a radius anymore. He could go to the Bruce Museum in Greenwich, Connecticut. But he had to be able to leave his apartment first.

That was the biggest stumbling block of all.
Yesterday, June had taken him to his shrink appointment, and Neal didn't want to think about how much time she'd spent coaxing him downstairs and outside. He'd felt like such an idiot. When he'd told his doctor, who specialized in helping victims of violent crimes, she had strongly urged him to accept a prescription for a very mild dose of Ativan. Worried that he'd become addicted to the drug, he'd refused her earlier offers.

She'd asked him, "Have you ever had a problem with drugs? Prescription drugs?"

"No. But I tend to get very – ummm – loopy on them." He explained what had happened with Doctor Summers and her special "Goodnight Cinderella" concoction.

She'd been appalled. "Now I can understand your lack of trust with me."

Neal had brushed her concerns away. "It was not a therapeutic session. It was for a case." He didn't tell her he'd gotten his revenge easily enough.

The doctor had still insisted, "Look, how about I write you a script for ten pills at the lowest dosage? You can't refill the prescription and I won't write another one for you if I have any concerns about abuse or overmedication."

Neal had finally agreed.

The doctor had given him one more piece of advice. "If you can bring yourself to leave your apartment without taking one, carry the bottle with you. This way, if you have a panic attack, you'll have the medication if you need it."

The advice was sound and before he could overthink it, he'd given the script to June, who'd been splendid about going to the pharmacy for him.

The bottle of pills was on the table, within reach. Right next to his phone. And not so far from the pile of papers that the Marshals needed him to sign, papers that Neal still hadn't sent over to Peter. He really did need to take care of that, before the Marshals came back. And there was something else he needed to give to Peter.

He didn't let himself think about what he was doing. He grabbed the papers, his phone and the bottle of pills and went into the closet and got a hat and jacket, a wallet with some of his "spare" identification and a bit of cash. And something that Peter had given him a long time ago, something he'd once given back, something he'd once left behind. Something that symbolized a life he'd once loved and resented.

His consultant's identification.

Neal rubbed his thumb over the plastic encased document and he could hear Peter telling him, "Figured if we didn't, you'd end up making one of these on your own."

Neal was out the door and down the stairs before he could change his mind. June was having lunch with Cindy and the household staff was elsewhere.

For just a second, at the front door, Neal felt like he had the day he walked out of Sing-Sing, dressed in the guard uniform he'd bought with the warden's wife's American Express. It felt like he was escaping prison. What was the man's name? Neal opened the door and as he put his foot on the top step, he remembered. Haskley. He'd been a little nebbish of a man, so obviously ill-suited to running a maximum security penitentiary, so easy to manipulate.

Neal kept thinking about Haskley and how he'd responded to Neal's simple flattery all the way to the
corner of 78th and Riverside. Without considering what he was doing, he raised his hand as a sea of yellow cabs cruised by. One pulled over, in front of him and Neal stared at the door.

The driver opened the passenger side window and shouted at him, "You going to get in, mon? Don't have all day."

Neal took a deep breath and opened the door. He remembered the time that Peter had hailed cab after cab and he'd kept letting the pretty models take their places, because it was just so much fun to annoy Peter.

"Where to, mon?"

"The FBI Building, thanks."

"Sheesh, mon. You want to go all the way into midtown during lunch hour; you'd better relax and be patient. It's going to be a loooong ride." The cabbie shook his head and the beads decorating his dreadlocks clattered pleasantly.

It was a long ride, but Neal found it hard to relax. He thought about asking the driver to lock the back doors so no one could reach in and drag him out, and then rethought that idea. If the doors were open, he could jump out if the driver decided to go for a little detour.

So he watched the passing scenery and forced himself to remember the last time he was at a particular point in the route. Sometimes he remembered waiting on a corner with Moz, sometimes he remembered walking two steps behind Vincent Adler on that street, but most of his memories were about treks with Peter. They probably had walked the entire length and breadth of the city – at least Manhattan – over the years.

He missed that.

"Almost there, mon. You doin' okay?" The cabbie turned to look at him as they were stopped at the light at 59th and Broadway. "You seem a little pale."

Neal smiled and the gesture felt natural, for the first time in a long time. "It's been a long winter, didn't get out much."

The cabbie nodded. "Ah, yeah, it was a hell of a winter. The sunshine's back and all too soon, we'll be complainin' about the heat and the humidity."

"The New Yorker's conversation – when all else fails, bitch about the weather."

"That's right, man. The weather – she's a bitch sometimes. But not today. Today's glorious. Today's a day to make a man happy he's alive."

The cab lurched forward and turned the corner. Neal clung to the suicide strap. They were at the corner of Sixth and 54th and Neal felt his heart start to race. Almost there, almost safe.

No. Not almost safe. He was safe. No one was going to hurt him. No one.

The cab pulled up in front of the FBI Building and Neal paid the fare and a generous tip. "Thanks for the ride, man."

"Hey, mon – no problem. You have a good day in this sunshine."

"I'll try."
"No, don't try – do."

Neal laughed, "Thanks, Yoda."

The cabbie chuckled and honked as he pulled away from the curb.

Neal took a deep breath and looked up at the building that had helped define his life for so long. He remembered all the times he'd entered this building with Peter at his side and put one foot in front of the other. He didn't see masked faces in the shadows, just memories of good times.

He could do this.

The guard at the front desk actually recognized him. "Hey, Mr. Caffrey, it's been a while. You doing okay?"

Neal wondered how much the guard knew. He decided that he probably didn't know – why would he? "Doing fine, thanks."

He walked over to the bank of elevators and the guard called after him. "Sorry – need you to sign in if you don't work here anymore."

"Ah, right." As he scrawled his name in the log book, Neal thought about flashing his consultant's ID, if just for old time's sake.

He waited for the elevator and felt the sweat pool at the base of his spine and his heart began to race again. He reached for the bottle of pills, not to take one, but to reassure himself they were there if he needed one. At that thought, Neal laughed to himself. It seemed like the shrink knew what she was doing.

The elevator made a few stops, people got in and got out – but no one Neal recognized. This was okay, no one was going to snatch him from an elevator car in the middle of the day. But he still kept his back to the wall and his eyes fixed firmly on the security camera. It took one minute and forty-seven seconds to travel from the ground floor to the twenty-first, except that it felt like a lifetime.

No one else got off with him and Neal was immeasurably grateful that there was no one from the White Collar division waiting in the lobby. The last time he had been here, Peter was packing up his office and Neal had promised him that he was going to visit so often, they'd have to kick him out. That was a good memory, a good place to stop the tape. Because everything that happened after that was … No. No. No. He pushed open the familiar glass doors.

"Neal?" Allen, the guard at the door, greeted him with a huge smile. "Good to see you!"

This time, Neal felt like his smile was plastered on. "Good to see you, too." Before he could ask to see Peter, which was another kind of strangeness, he was mobbed by a sea of smiling, familiar faces.

There was Andrea, Peter's admin. Price and Winters and Cohen, three of the division's most seasoned agents. Other faces, familiar and friendly, but no Peter.

Everyone started talking at once and it seemed like the walls were closing in. But Neal kept smiling. He kept looking up at Peter's office, but it was dark. Was Peter gone for the day?

Someone grabbed his hand and Neal almost – almost but didn't – scream. It was Jones. He was smiling too, but Neal saw something behind his eyes – compassion and worry. "Come on, guys – give Neal some space."
The pressure from the crowd receded and Neal caught his breath and his sanity. He thanked everyone for their concern and their good wishes, for the flowers and fruit baskets and everything else that had been sent to the hospital and to his apartment.

Eventually, they all went back to their desks, but Neal could feel the weight of their collective gaze.

"Come upstairs, okay?" Clinton gestured up towards Peter's old office.

"You've been promoted again?"

Clinton nodded but didn't elaborate.

Neal sat down in the same chair he'd occupied so many times. "So, how does it feel to be upstairs?"

"Good. Really good. Got my own task force, too."

"Nice." This felt so weird and awkward. "Thanks for rescuing me, back down there."

"No problem. I figured you were feeling a little overwhelmed – you had that deer caught in the headlights look on your face."

"Yeah, I'm not surprised. It was a bit much. But it's nice to be missed."

"True, true." Clinton cleared his throat and asked awkwardly, "What brings you back here? I mean not that there's a problem with you visiting, but I'd think this isn't a place you'd just casually pop into."

Neal wondered if Clinton knew about his problems. "I have some paperwork for the Marshals, I thought I'd drop it off and surprise Peter."

He pulled out the papers and tapped them against his knee. He didn't take out his ID folder – that was for Peter and Peter alone.

"Peter? Here?"

"Yeah, here. Peter Burke, Assistant Special Agent in Charge of the White Collar Division? I think you know him, he's been your boss for a few years."

"Have you seen Peter recently?" Now Clinton was giving him a funny look.

"Not since last Friday, when the word came that the rest of my sentence was commuted." He sighed. "I behaved like a bit of an asshole and we both decided that we needed a little space. We've been in touch, though. Why?"

Clinton wiped his mouth and didn't answer right away.

"What's going on?" Neal couldn't begin to imagine what the problem was. "Peter's okay? He texted me a few hours ago."

"Peter retired."

"What?"

"He retired, effective Wednesday."

"I don't understand. Peter retired. From the Bureau?"

Clinton nodded. "He didn't talk about it with you?"
Neal shook his head. "No, not at all. We've talked about a few of his current cases – he asked for my opinion on a couple of fraud schemes, but he said nothing about leaving the Bureau." Neal felt heartsick. This was his fault; it seemed that he couldn't escape the collateral damage.

Clinton looked like he was about to say something, but changed his mind. "He's retired and he's happy about it."

"How can he be?"

"Maybe you should go ask him?"

"Right, right." Neal got up, eager to get out of there. But before he left, he tossed the papers he'd brought with him onto the desk. "Listen, could you take care of this for me? Send it over to the Marshals so they don't come banging on June's door, again."

"Sure." Clinton took the papers. "I probably should say something about if you're ever interested in coming back, in any capacity, we could probably make something work – but that doesn't seem very appropriate."

Neal laughed, but he didn't quite feel the humor. "I think, at this point, my answer would have to be no, anyway."

"Right. Neal– take care of yourself. And stay in touch, okay?"

"I promise." Neal reached into his pocket and clasped the bottle of Ativan. He had to get to Brooklyn first. Then, maybe he would take a pill.

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Peter checked his phone, still no response from Neal. He was tempted to call June, but didn't. There were any number of reasons why Neal hadn't responded, and none of them were sinister. He'd give it a few more hours before hitting the panic button and heading over to Manhattan.

Besides, he had a reason to visit. He had a gift for Neal – it arrived with the day's mail. Tonight, they'd talk – really talk. He'd tell Neal about his retirement, he'd make Neal understand that he was happy with this development, because that was the goddamn absolute truth.

And he had other, even more important news to share.

But that was for this evening. Right now, he deserved a little reward for all his hard work. He was going to go out for a run.

Already dressed in workout clothes and sneakers – his usual around-the-house attire – Peter grabbed his keys, the slimmed down version of his wallet he kept for just such occasions, and his phone. He wasn't going far, probably around the block, up through the park, and back – his regular route. The run would clear his head, settle him down, help him work through problems.

He'd always loved running, and if there was one thing he regretted about living in the Northeast it was that he was usually restricted to treadmills and indoor tracks in the winter – especially the past few, which had been unusually cold and snowy.

But the snow and the cold were gone, hopefully for the next eight months, and he could indulge himself to his heart's content. Or at least until his aging knees started to protest.

Satchmo looked up as he went to the door, saw what Peter was planning and went back to his doggy
dreams with a contented sigh. The Lab had never been a runner and once he'd left puppyhood, he became the worst possible running partner. Actually, even as a puppy, he'd been terrible.

"Watch the house, boy. I'll be back soon."

Satch didn't bother to reply.

It was as perfect a spring day as Peter could remember. Last weekend, when he'd visited El, he'd gotten up early and had a run along the Washington Mall. A few of the famous cherry trees were still in blossom and the air smelled sweet, but there were thousands of rats hiding in the shrubbery, too.

If they relocated to Maryland, he wouldn't have the Mall, or even a well-mapped out urban grid to run along. He'd have a few acres of pasture and a country road connecting the property to the nearest town, five miles away. It would certainly be different.

He ran the circuit through the park, past the playground, the dog run, the ball fields, and soon enough, he was back on DeKalb and home was just up the block.

Peter jogged in place for a few seconds, not quite sure he believed what his eyes were seeing. There was a man in a sport coat and a light gray hat sitting on his stoop.

Neal?

He rushed forward, almost tripping on a cracked piece of sidewalk. Peter caught his balance and looked up again. Neal was still there, staring up at the house. As he approached, Neal turned – he probably heard the sound of his feet against the pavement. A small smile curved his lips as Peter came to a halt.

"Nice day for a run."

"Yeah, nice day to be out and about."

Neal took a deep breath and Peter could see him doing his best not to panic at the exposure. But rather than make a big deal out of it, he just climbed the steps and expected Neal to follow.

Satchmo must have sensed Neal, because he practically ran over Peter to get to his old friend. Neal, for his part, relished this reunion, going down on his hands and knees to give the boy an enthusiastic greeting.

Peter let man and dog get reacquainted while he retrieved a bottle of water from the fridge. Watching the two of them play made his heart hurt, in a good way.

Neal got to his feet and Satchmo retreated to his dog bed. Peter stepped aside to let Neal into the kitchen and wash his hands. This all felt so normal, so perfect.

Afraid to shatter the golden mood, he waited for Neal to say something.

"I stopped by the office, had to drop off the papers the Marshals left. I talked to Jones."

"Ah."

"Ah? That's all you're going to say?"

Neal wasn't combative, not like he'd been the last time he'd seen him. But the time for secrets, for evasions, for good intentions and incomplete communications was over. So he put it out there. "I retired. The brass in D.C. asked me to, but it was a decision I'd been seriously thinking about for a
"They asked you to leave because of me, didn't they?"

Peter nodded.

Neal sucked in his breath. "I always knew I'd cost you your career."

"No, Neal – you didn't. I have my twenty years, I've enjoyed my work as a field agent, as a supervisory agent, as ASAC, but I've also come to realize that I have a family that needs me more than I need to be an FBI agent. And I want to be with my family more than I want to be an FBI agent."

Neal stared at him, his eyes almost burning with emotion. "Once, you said I was your family. At that moment, you hadn't seemed too happy about it."

Peter smiled, although the memory that Neal summoned wasn't a happy one. "I wasn't a happy man at that moment. Six weeks behind bars had really messed with my head." And then he winced. "Sorry, you did four years..." And six months in a hell hole enduring the unendurable.

But Neal didn't take offense. "I always knew that prison was a possibility for me, from my earliest criminal efforts. You – you never expected a life behind bars, a life where you spent every moment fearing you'd get shivved because you're a Fed. One day you're facing a life sentence, the next, you're getting a promotion and word that you're being groomed for a chair at the really big table. That has to mess with your head."

Peter nodded sharply, grateful that Neal was able to understand what he'd gone through. "And to answer the question that you were asking, you are my family. No qualifications."

"Clinton said you seemed happy about this."

"I am." Peter smiled. "I am kind of surprised at how happy I am."

"I always figured they'd be carrying you out feet first."

"Maybe I once thought that, too. But that might have worked for guys like Hughes, who didn't have a family."

"And who had second careers as NSA section chiefs."

Peter just raised an eyebrow.

"Moz told me. He also told me that Reese tried to recruit him for the Company or the Service or whatever they're called."

Peter didn't know whether to laugh or cry. "I can just imagine Mozzie's reaction to that offer."

"I'm not so sure he turned it down. He's been doing a lot of traveling lately."

Peter shook his head in disbelief. "Well, stranger things have happened."

Neal leaned forward, bracing himself against the island countertop and stared at him. "You're really okay with this?"

"I am."
"I think I believe you."

"You should believe me. It's the truth."

Neal went to the fridge and took out a bottle of water, but he didn't open it. Peter watched him drift from the kitchen to the living room, as if he was trying to reground himself in the space. "I'd say I liked what you've done with the place, but I'm not a fan of the half-packed, half-unpacked look."

"It's a work in progress."

Neal picked up one of the framed photos that he'd unpacked when he'd first decided to stay in New York, when he was desperately trying to find his own normal ground. It was the picture of the two of them in their tuxedos, the one that had given Phil Kramer such heartburn. He put it down without commenting and picked up the one that had graced his desk at work, of him and El on their honeymoon.

Peter couldn't take the silence anymore. "I'm glad you're here, Neal. Really glad."

"Aren't you going to ask me how I managed it?"

"If you want to tell me."

"You know, I really kind of hate that passive-aggressive approach. I've been meaning to tell you that. I get it from my therapist, I don't need it from you." Despite the words, Neal didn't seem angry.

"Okay, sorry. For the record, I was kind of shocked to see you at my doorstep, considering how reluctant you are to leave your apartment unless you absolutely have to."

"I saw my shrink yesterday – the MD, not the PhD. She gave me these." Neal pulled a bottle of pills out of his pocket and tossed them to Peter.

"Ativan? For the anxiety? They're helping?"

Neal took the bottle from him and put it back in his pocket. "I haven't taken any, but knowing that I have them got me out of the house and out on the street. And you know what helped me even more?"

Peter shook his head.

"Seeing the city and remembering being with you. There, at Columbus Circle when you half-jokingly accused me of stealing Louis Thayer's Untitled Number 2, or at the corner of Broadway and Sixty-Third, near the old New York Room. You and me – and this city – we're everywhere together. That's what kept me going."

Peter rubbed his eyes, his fingers wet from the tears. "Neal –"

"Last Friday, when I was so stupidly angry at you, I thought of our relationship in terms of some sick co-dependence. I was wrong. We need each other, but not in some terrible, twisted way."

"We're family, Neal." Was that his voice, so harsh?

"Yes, Peter, we are."

Peter gathered his thoughts. Maybe the time was right; maybe there wouldn't ever be a better moment. "Can I show you something?"
Neal nodded.

Peter retrieved a folder from the dining room table and handed it to Neal. "Tell me what you think."

He watched Neal's expression carefully. He could see the curiosity, the appreciation, and a touch of fear.

"It's gorgeous, Peter. Twelve acres of prime Maryland farmland. There's a barn and a fenced in pasture. You'll be able to keep horses."

"Yeah, but that's not the best part of it." He took the folder and turned it towards a very specific page. "This is."

Again, he watched Neal's face, and this time all he saw was confusion. "A guesthouse?"

"It's got two bedrooms, a gourmet kitchen, a full bathroom and a powder room. There's eastern exposure in the living area and a screened in patio with western exposure. I – no we – El and I – thought it would be perfect for you."

Neal looked at the glossy real estate brochure and was surprised to see it was shaking. No, his hands were shaking. He put the booklet down and curled his hands into fists.

"Neal?"

"For me?"

"If you want it. If you think you'd like living in Maryland, with us. Even part time. It could be your home base, a place to rest and recharge your batteries. If you were going to travel again, you would always be able to stay with us, in your own private space. It has full security – a single entrance and a panic room, too. So does the main house."

Neal stared at the brochure as Peter rambled on, saying how June was wonderful, that he'd always have a place with her, too. But she was getting older and if there came a time when she couldn't keep the house, Neal would always have a place to come to. A place where he'd be safe, where there were people who loved him. A place with his family. Peter stumbled over his words and when Neal finally looked up, he saw the tears pouring down his friend's face.

"Why are you crying?"

"I don't know." Peter did something that endeared him to Neal like nothing else ever had, he wiped his nose with the back of his hand, looked at the mess and wiped it against his shirt.

"Peter Burke, the world's oldest four-year old boy."

Peter laughed, a watery chuckle. "Sorry about that."

"I'm glad I don't have to do your laundry." Neal joked. If he didn't he might just start crying too.

"What do you think?"

"About this?" He touched the brochure describing all the features of a guesthouse that was probably bigger than the entire Burke home here in Brooklyn. "I think you and Elizabeth are truly wonderful, to do this – for me."
"Is it something you'd consider?"

Neal wanted to scream, yes, yes, yes, but something stopped him. It could have been a caution brought on by too much trauma, or his fear of actually having something he'd never dreamed he could really have, or that perverse imp that delighted in messing up every good thing Peter had done for him. So he just said, "I might. I need to think about it."

"Okay." Peter did seem a little disappointed.

Neal had to know, though. "If I say no, if I say that I want to stay in New York, what happens?"

Peter sighed and smiled. "Then I stay in New York. El leaves the National Gallery and comes back, permanently. We've decided we're not really suited for a bi-city marriage. We need each other too much. Especially now."

"I don't like the idea of Elizabeth giving up her dream job for me. It's bad enough – "

Peter held up a hand, holding him off. "El's not giving up her dream job for you. Just as I didn't leave the FBI because of you – well, not completely. There's another bit of news I was going to share with you tonight, along with my retirement. It's not something I wanted to tell you via text or email."

Neal couldn't begin to imagine what other bombshell Peter was about to drop. And what a bombshell it was.

"El's pregnant." There was such joy in Peter's face that it almost hurt to look at him. "We're going to be parents. She's about three and a half months along. Neither of us wants her to be a married single mother – so we're going to be together, either here in New York or in Maryland. But you're part of us, part of our family. Our child is going to need to grow up knowing his or her godparent."

The news about Elizabeth's pregnancy was almost less shocking than their expectations about him. "Godparent? Me?" Neal heard the squeak in his voice.

"Yes, Neal. You. There's no one I would trust more with my child's well-being than you."

He stood up abruptly and wrapped his arms around himself. This was too much, too much. "I need to go. I need to think about everything. Sorry, sorry. Sorry." His heart was racing and he was panting, trying to drag in enough air.

And Peter was beside him, stroking his back, murmuring that it was okay, that nothing bad was going to happen, he – Peter – wouldn't let it.

The words penetrated the fog of panic and his heart started to beat normally, the buzzing stopped, and he was – amazingly, miraculously – okay. Not perfect, but okay – Peter's hands stroking his back, the damp and sweaty tee-shirt under his cheek were comforting him down to his soul. He didn't know how long he clung to Peter, but as long as Peter didn't care, he wasn't going to move.

"Do you want to take a pill?"

"No, I'm good."

"You sure?" Peter seemed skeptical, but he didn't let go of him.

Neal reassured him. "No, I really am." He took a deep breath and everything felt as close to normal as things felt these days and he finally pulled away. "I didn't say it, but congratulations, Peter. This is wonderful. You must be so thrilled, after everything." Neal couldn't help but remember Elizabeth's
distress at the state of her marriage last January, and one of the great pleasures he'd had during his months of recuperation had been watching Peter and Elizabeth do their own healing.

There was still worry in Peter's eyes, worry for him, but that joy was back. "We'd tried, back when we were first married, but then decided we really didn't want children. El had her career, I had mine and it didn't seem fair that either of us would have to make the sacrifices necessary. But we're at a point in our lives now when this makes perfect sense."

"And you really want me to be your offspring's godparent?"

"Yes, absolutely. It's a big responsibility; do you think you're up for it?"

Neal was curious, "What are a godparent's duties? I didn't have one, you know – so I haven't the slightest clue what I'm supposed to do."

Peter stroked his chin and Neal thought he saw a spark of mischief there. "Well, you'd need to teach him or her how to pick a lock."

Neal stared at Peter, not certain he heard what he thought he had heard.

"And how to recreate some fine Italian Renaissance bronze medals out of chocolate."

A bubble of laughter escaped his lips. "Peter!"

"Hush, I am serious. Let's see – no forging antique spirits, at least not until he or she's old enough to drink. But since I think that most children are natural con artists, I'm pretty certain you'll have no problem developing your own curriculum."

Neal shook his head. "Stop teasing me."

Peter did, and smiled at him. "Okay, I expect you to teach my son or daughter the things you are best at – loyalty, generosity, creativity. Love. Can you do that?"

"I can try." Neal then remembered the cabbie's words to him. "No, I can do."

"So, you'll think about the place in Maryland?"

"Yes, when do you need to know?"

"The place has been on the market for a few months without any offers, so there's no immediate rush. El's going to be moving back to New York in a few weeks, regardless. Once the morning sickness starts, I don't want her to be alone."

Neal opened his mouth to point out the obvious, but Peter continued. "And her apartment is small and there isn't room for two adults and a dog. Besides, I'm not leaving you behind, so get used to it."

This was getting to be a bit too much. Not that he felt panicky, but simply overwhelmed. "I think I need to think about this, on my own."

"Okay, but I have one more thing for you."

"Seriously, Peter? How much more do you think I can take?"

Peter didn't say anything as he picked up a box on the coffee table and handed it to him. "I got this for you."
Neal made a joke, "My birthday was last month. You already gave me a wonderful present." Peter had given him a pair of dog socks, hot pink ones with poodles on them.

"This isn't a birthday present, but I think you might want it. Or maybe not."

Neal took the box; it was badly wrapped in thick brown paper – quite possibly a recycled bag from Trader Joe's. "Elegant."

"Shut up and open it."

"Nice, Peter. Very nice."

He pulled the paper apart slowly, knowing he was tormenting Peter. And then he stopped, overwhelmed all over again. "Peter…"

"I know that you're not really a watch guy, and gadgets are a means to an end for you, but I couldn't forget what you'd said to me about the tracker. And I know what you've been going through, so I thought…" Peter's voice trailed off.

"You got me a GPS watch."

"Yeah – it's one of those fitness trackers, but it has a GPS locator in it. And I can sync it with an app on my phone and my computer."

"You could pull up a map on my travels when you're having your morning coffee."

"If you want me to."

"You'll always be able to find me."

"As long as you're wearing it."

Neal stared at the device. It was stylish, if you liked the high tech ultramodern look, and it was certainly a lot more attractive that the black plastic anklet he'd hated and resented and longed for. "Have you set it up?"

"Not yet – I didn't know if you wanted it."

Neal strove for control and found it. "More than I wanted hot pink doggie socks with poodles on them. And I really like those socks." He pulled the watch from the box and shoved it at Peter. "Set it up. Please."

Peter pulled out his phone and started the process. "The app's actually better than the one the Marshals have. More accurate."

"Really?"

"Yeah."

"I remember that Marshal, Deckard, bragging about the accuracy of the new trackers. Whatever happened to him?"

Peter kept focusing on the app and the watch, but replied, "He's doing twenty to life in a protective custody unit in Allenwood. On lockdown twenty-three hours a day so the other cons can't get to him." Peter finally looked up at him. "We had some good times, didn't we?"
"Yes, we did. We did good, too."

"Yes, we most certainly did." Peter handed the watch back to him. "You're all set. You'll need to charge it, of course. Unlike your tracker, this doesn't have replaceable batteries."

Neal put the watch on. It was light, but it was also an anchor. It would keep him from simply drifting out to sea, lost forever. "I have a lot to think about."

"Yes, you do. El will be home tomorrow morning; can we come over for brunch?"

Neal hated the studied diffidence in Peter's voice, the very fact that he'd even asked if he was allowed to visit. Neal knew he put that there and he needed to take it away. "You don't ever have to ask. You, both of you, are always welcome."

Peter nodded. "Okay, great. Let me get my car keys and I'll take you home."

"No, no need. I can manage."

"It's no big deal."

"It's Friday and it's rush hour. I can get a cab."

Peter gave him a skeptical look.

"I haven't lost my magical superpowers – at least not that one."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. I need to do this."

"All right, but call me when you get home, okay?"

Neal grinned. "Of course I will, Dad."

Peter stood and watched as Neal left, every instinct telling him that he should follow; he should wait with Neal until he got into a cab. He should just put him in the car and take him back to June's, regardless of the damn traffic. But he didn't.

What he did do was pull out his phone and call up the tracking app for Neal's new watch. Neal was walking at a steady pace, and then he stopped when he reached the corner. He didn't move for a minute, and then he started to move again, this time a lot more quickly. Neal was in a cab.

Peter felt relieved and very drained. This afternoon had gone well – a lot better than he'd expected – but the whipsaw emotions had taken their toll. He'd shower and call Elizabeth. He needed to hear her voice. He needed her love, her wisdom.

Then maybe, a nap.

Shower accomplished, he called El.

"Sorry, hon. Can't talk – snafu with the caterers for tonight."

"How are you feeling?"
"Tired, but good. Would be better if I got out of here on time. How are you doing?"

"I talked to Neal today."

"How did that go?" Peter could hear the worry and love in her question.

"A lot better than I expected. And I told him everything. He had a minor freak out about the godparent thing."

"Oh, hon – you probably should have held off on that."

"Nah – it's okay. He's happy for us; he just needs to wrap his brain around everything." Peter didn't tell her that Neal had come to the house on his own. That news he'd save for tomorrow.

"That's wonderful." There were voices in the background. "Hon, I've got to go. I'll see you tomorrow morning, without fail."

"Love you, hon."

"Love you, too, hon."

The phone disconnected and Peter felt a little less exhausted. The Yankees were playing at home tonight. He'd make himself a sandwich, turn on the game and enjoy a little downtime while waiting for Neal to call and let him know he was home. Given the time of day, it would probably take close to an hour for Neal to get back to Riverside. Not that Peter couldn't check the tracker, but he wanted to hear from Neal. A blue dot on a map wasn't going to give Peter any sense of how his friend was doing, mentally.

He went downstairs and came to a halt.

Neal was sitting on his couch, petting Satchmo and looking a little wrecked. He jumped up when he saw Peter.

"Neal?" When did he come back?

"I hope you don't mind. I picked your front door lock." Neal held up a pair of lock picks. "They were in my breast pocket. My spares. I remembered I had them just before the cab got to the bridge. So I had him turn back."

"You came back because you were carrying spare lock picks?" That didn't make any sense.

"No. I came back because I realized I wouldn't have to stand outside to wait for you to open the door."

"Oh. Okay." Neal seemed a little fragile, like he'd taken one huge step back from just a half-hour ago. Peter waited for him to continue.

"I forgot to give you something."

Peter had no idea what Neal was talking about until he reached into his jacket pocket and then he was hit by déjà vu so hard it stole his breath.

Neal pulled out a black leather folder. "I think I need to give this back."

Peter didn't take it. "Consider it a well-earned souvenir."
Neal smiled. "Just don't use it?"

"That would be wise."

Neal made no effort to leave. "There's something else. I came back because I had to tell you something. And I couldn't wait." Neal licked his lips.

Peter swallowed hard against the hope rising in his soul. "What, Neal?"

Neal clenched his fists and wouldn't quite meet Peter's eyes.

"Neal?"

Neal finally looked at him, pain and fear and joy and love warring so clearly on his face. "I can't do this without you."

"Do what?" Peter held his breath on Neal's answer.

"Be the man you think I can be. You've always been the one to see the good in me. I can be good, but I can't do it without you."

There was so much pain and hope in those simple, desperate sentences, so much unspoken meaning. So much that didn't need to be said. Peter wrapped his arms around Neal, gently, cautiously. Like that time in Praia, Neal hesitated for a brief moment, and then hugged him back. He held on tight, like a man clinging to a life preserver, and he kept whispering, "I can't do this without you."

Peter held him and whispered back, "You don't have to. You never have to."
Chapter 31

Sometime in Early August – A Tuesday Evening, Two Years in the Future

It was about ten minutes to five, and the gallery was almost empty. The guard was giving him the stink-eye but until the final chimes sounded, Neal didn't have to give up his seat on the bench.

Besides, Natalie was really enjoying his story.

"The evil vizier had commanded the prince to return what he'd taken, but the prince refused. He knew that the vizier was trying to trap him."

Natalie babbled and patted at his cheeks.

"The dragon and all of his friends came to the prince's rescue and help him defeat the evil vizier, who wanted to put the prince into the most horrible servitude. He wanted to hurt the dragon, too."

Natalie blew a raspberry at him. He blew one back and she giggled.

"Look at the picture, sweetie. There's the good dragon and the evil vizier." Neal turned the toddler so she could see the Raphael that nearly cost him so much. But Natalie wasn't interested in the art; she clearly wanted more of the story from Uncle Neal.

He continued with the silliness, but their time was running out. The gallery lights blinked and the chimes sounded, signaling the end of visiting hours. But Neal didn't move from the bench.

From the corner of his eye, he could see the guard approach, but he also heard footsteps – the almost metallic ping of high heels on marble floor – quickly approaching. They were followed by a heavier tread.

Neal breathed a sigh of relief. And Natalie squealed as she saw her mommy and daddy.

Peter reached for his daughter and apologized. "Sorry we took so long."

Neal grinned and noted the slightly disheveled state of Peter's attire, and the beginnings of an oval bruise on his collarbone. Elizabeth was placating the guard and Neal smiled to himself. The button over the zipper on the back of her skirt was undone and she wasn't wearing the jewelry she had on when she'd left the house this morning.

He'd wondered if Peter and Elizabeth were going to be having a little hotel-room nookie when they'd asked him to babysit, but discarded the notion when Peter mentioned that they were seeing their accountant in D.C. and suggested that they meet up here, if Neal wanted to.

It looked like they had had the time to review their quarterly tax returns and enjoy some afternoon delight.

"There's my big girl!" Peter got that silly, mushy expression that he always wore when he was with his daughter. It made Neal's heart hurt to see it, but in the very best way.

"We've got to scram; they're about to close the gates." Elizabeth joined them, took the baby from Peter and tucked her into the stroller. "My employee credentials aren't, apparently, an all-access pass."
As the four of them left the gallery, Neal could hear the clanking of the gates all over the museum start to descend. There was a time when he'd have given his left nut to watch the National Gallery's security procedures in action. He could still summon some level of academic interest, but he had to be honest with himself. Being Natalie Burke's godparent consumed most of his energy.

The heat was oppressive – Washington in the summer was a swamp, literally – and they were limp by the time they got to the Metro station at the National Archives. Neal said a prayer of thanks to the architects of the city subway system. It might be tiny compared to New York's, but it was modern and clean, and best of all, air conditioned.

"You're doing okay?" Peter asked as they stood on the platform, waiting for the first of three trains that would take them back to Maryland.

"Doing fine. I've spent my day with my best girl, had a picnic lunch on the Mall, and looked at great art. How could I not be fine?"

Peter gave him that look. The one that never failed to frustrate him – like he knew a secret and he wasn't going to share it.

"What?"

"You know, I think you are fine."

Neal laughed. "And so are you, Mr. Burke." It had taken him a while to get accustomed to not using 'Agent Burke'. "I bet Mrs. Burke thinks you're very fine, too. Have fun at the accountant's office?" He patted Peter on the shoulder and fixed his collar.

Even in the Metro station's dim light, he could see Peter's cheeks darken.

"You're incorrigible, Neal."

He just stuck his hands in his pockets and chuckled. The sound must have caught El's attention, because she looked up from Natalie, who was getting fussy and fidgeting. "What's so funny?"

It was good to tease Peter, but he wasn't going to embarrass Elizabeth. "Nothing, just whining in my head about the heat. I'm glad that unlike you, I don't have to do this every day." Three months after giving birth, Elizabeth got her job back at the National Gallery.

She wiped the perspiration off the back of her neck and muttered. "I love my job. I really love my job."

"Especially in August, when it's 103 in the shade?"

"Did you have to remind me of that?" Natalie started crying and reaching for her mommy. "Shh, sweetie. It's too hot for me to carry you."

Thankfully, the train wasn't packed and the three adults rode in grateful silence until they had to change trains. Neal positioned himself against the door to make sure that Peter and Elizabeth got the baby stroller out without anyone blocking their exit. It was funny, but as commuters went, New Yorkers were a much more polite and considerate breed that Washingtonians, who would trample their grandmothers to get a seat.

They finally made it to the last stop on the Red Line, where Elizabeth had parked. It was still an hour's drive home through Beltway traffic. Elizabeth sat in the back and fell asleep next to her daughter. Peter seemed disinclined to chat, so Neal used the opportunity to relax.
Of course, now that he could, it was difficult to stop his brain. He sighed.

"What's the matter?" Peter kept his eyes on the road. Not that they were moving. Rush hour on the Beltway was a hundred times worse than anything on the Henry Hudson.

"Nothing. Just …"

"Just what?"

"Just thinking."

"Good thoughts?"

"Mostly."

"Want to share?"

"I got rid of the last of the Ativan this morning." He'd actually never taken a single pill, but had been carrying the bottle around like a security blanket. The only time he'd come close to needing to take one was when he'd testified against Cowboy Boots and The Slav back in New York, but that had been it. Over the past few months, he'd been disposing of the pills, one by one, putting them into empty laundry detergent bottles that were bound for recycling. It was a lot safer than flushing them.

"How does it feel?"

"Freeing, but I also feel a little … I don't know … vulnerable, too. But I thought today would be a good day to make that break."

"Because no matter how bad things got in your head, you knew you needed to stay strong for my daughter?"

"Yeah. You trust me to take care of her. And I don't need that security blanket anymore."

Peter reached over and touched Neal's wrist. "You still have this one."

"And I'll always have it." He couldn't imagine a life where Peter couldn't find him.

"Tell me, is Moz still giving you grief about it?"

"Last time I saw him, he took one look at it, gave me a very dirty look and never said a word."

"He told Elizabeth he might stop by this weekend."

Neal laughed. "I think he talks to your wife more than he talks to me these days."

"Do you mind?" Peter seemed genuinely concerned.

Neal thought about the question before answering. "No, not really. I love Moz, but our interests are different now. We're not the same people we once were, and we won't pretend that we are. I have the life I want. Moz has – I think – reconciled himself to that."

"You're happy?"

They passed a crowded exit and picked up a little speed. The world outside the car was lush and green and the sun sparkled against the road.
Neal leaned back against the seat, smiled, and said, "Yes, I am."

FIN

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