

A Victory Nonetheless

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A Victory Nonetheless

by [alice_time](#)

Summary

Neal Caffrey, forger, con artist, thief--Sub? Well, he wasn't according to his file but after his arrest the truth comes out. Peter is forced to rethink how he sees Neal when it comes out that Neal was the victim of Dominant coercion and while he's a criminal, there are bigger fish out there and Caffrey could be the key to helping the White Collar department catch them. Neal takes the deal and Peter ends up with a submissive ward he's not entirely sure he's prepared to handle.

And if that wasn't enough, Kate betrays Neal and Vincent Adler is in the wind again--if Peter can't catch Adler before Mozzie and Neal find him, there's no telling what they might do in the name of justice.

If you've read my other BDSM AU, you'll have a general idea of my preferences, but basically this is a softer/cuddlier BDSM AU.

Neal's Greatest Con

Chapter Notes

A bit short to start, but I wanted to get the world set up first.

Zoo, I hope you like it.

Peter Burke was *not* happy. Sure, he'd finally arrested James Bonds AKA Neal Caffrey, but then he got a call from the FBI holding center that there was something *wrong* with Mr. Caffrey. The agent who called hadn't explained the problem. Given the nature of Peter's relationship with the alleged-forger, Peter could imagine a good dozen scenarios that would qualify as there being something *wrong* with Mr. Caffrey.

When he arrived at the prison, there was some kind of a commotion going on.

He flashed his badge at the desk. "Agent Peter Burke, I got a call about Neal Caffrey."

"Yes." The young woman at the desk nodded. "Uh—right. I..." The phone rang and she startled before picking it up. She answered with mostly, *Yes*, *No* and *Right away*. She put the phone down and looked at Peter. "Sir, you just need to turn your firearm in and then you can meet with the Dynamic Support representative."

"Why is there someone from DSR here?" He frowned, detaching his holster and signing the form she presented him with.

"It's better if they explain." She frowned. "I'll buzz you in."

"Okay." He blinked and headed in through the door that opened with the buzzer. A tall woman wearing the pale blue uniform polo of DSR was waiting in the hall, a file in hand. A finely tooled leather collar rested at the hollow of her throat, golden tags glinting from the loop.

"Agent Burke?"

"Yes."

She smiled. "I'm Laura Byrnes, I'm here to represent Mr. Caffrey's best interests."

"I'm a bit confused here, Ms. Byrnes," Peter admitted. "What *exactly* is going on?"

"Apparently when they went to check on Mr. Caffrey this morning they found him in a state of distress."

“What kind of distress?”

“He suffered a severe Drop.”

“Neal Caffrey is a registered Dom, Ms. Byrnes.”

“That may be so, Agent Burke, but the center did some testing and—that young man *might* be a Switch, but he is not a Dom. He’s responded well to Respidol and some touch therapy. After an initial evaluation and a medical exam, it’s become pretty clear that Mr. Caffrey was —” she took a breath. “That Mr. Caffrey has been abused by whomever his Dominant partner was. He’s touch-starved, malnourished and very anxious. Bloodwork and hair samples were tested for drugs and we found traces of Drop inducers as well as sedatives and stimulants. I’m surprised, honestly, that he has been able to present a Dominant front at all.”

“He’s a very good actor.” Peter swallowed. “I—what exactly are you telling me, Ms. Byrnes? Are we looking at a case of coercion?”

“We both know that the law is pretty clear on this. *If* a Dom was behind his criminal activities...”

“He’s an accessory at best. I know.” Peter rubbed his hand over his face. “Okay. We’ll look into that.”

“Good. Then I’ve got one last thing for us to take care of.”

“What’s that?”

“Well, apparently there was a paperwork irregularity and you are still listed as the custodial agent for Mr. Caffrey.”

Peter sighed. “I see.”

“So I need you to sign off on a few things. We’re going to transfer him to the Dynamic Support wing at Memorial West.” She handed over the file. “You’ll have to be a part of the escort.”

“Of course.” He flipped through the file. “This doesn’t look good.” He sighed. “Okay, can I see him?”

“Of course, follow me.”

Peter closed the file and followed Ms. Byrnes down the hall and into the center’s medical wing. Caffrey was in a bed at the end of the ward with another DSR rep at his side—and unBonded sub by the band on his wrist. The kid looked thin, Peter realized. He’d thought that at the arrest, but brushed it aside as a sign Caffrey had been on the run. His dark curls were stuck to his forehead with sweat and Peter found himself with an almost irrational urge to sweep them back. His Dominant instincts were practically shouting at him. *Protect.*

“Agent Burke,” Neal flashed a smile. “Wow, did not expect to see you here.”

“So,” Peter started, “you lied about your Dynamic.” He raised his eyebrows. “You didn’t think that could be a safety issue?”

Neal shrugged. “Never really thought about it.”

After everything Ms. Byrnes had told him, and his brief glimpse of the file, it still took Peter a minute to peel back the external posturing that Neal presented and see what Ms. Byrnes saw. He remembered when Neal shook his hand at the storage facility, how his hand had trembled a touch, how his eyes had gone wide when he saw Kate. The genuine sound of his thanks.

There was more to it. Caffrey’s cons had gotten bolder and bolder in those last months—desperate. He’d been seeking Kate Moreau with reckless abandon. The look on Neal’s face when he saw Kate was—practically worshipful. Luckily, Peter knew exactly where to find Ms. Moreau.

Now, he could see past the fragile smile fixed on Neal’s face. He could see how he held himself now, rigid with the pretense of being relaxed.

Why did he Drop out of the blue though? Peter sighed. “You want to tell me what happened before you Dropped?”

Neal shrugged. “I just don’t like enclosed spaces.”

“Are you really going to lie to my face?” Peter asked. “You forget I know how you stole those Faberge pieces in Berlin.” He raised his eyebrows.

Much to Peter’s surprise, the kid actually *flinched*. He hadn’t even put his Dom voice on for the question. Peter glanced at the DSR reps and then back at Neal, who was blinking away tears.

“Hey, hey, I’m not mad at you,” Peter said hurriedly. “Okay? I’m just worried. I want to know what happened to you.”

Neal swallowed, glancing up at Peter, all pretense of control shattered. “I-I got a visitor yesterday.”

“Who?” Peter kept his tone as neutral as possible.

Neal shook his head, lips pressed into a tight line.

“It’s okay, Neal. You can tell me. I won’t be mad.”

The other DSR rep squeezed Neal’s hand gently, reassuring him. “It’s okay. You’re safe here.”

“V-Vincent Adler.” Neal looked down at his lap. “He didn’t use that name though.”

Vincent Adler. Peter knew the name. A stock-broker whose Ponzi scheme cost his clients millions of dollars before he vanished into thin air.

“Why did he come here to see you?” Peter continued.

“I don’t know.” Neal shook his head. “He hates me. He said I screwed everything up.” He swallowed. “Couldn’t even stay out of prison. Fucked up everything.”

“No, no,” Peter shook his head. “No, you did good, kid. Telling us.” He took a minute, uncertain, before placing his hand gently on Neal’s shoulder, flattered a bit that the kid didn’t flinch from the touch. “I’m proud of you for telling me, Neal.”

Watching those bright blue eyes widen in surprise nearly broke Peter’s heart.

“You are?”

“Yeah, you’re a good boy.” Peter moved his hand, squeezing the back Neal’s neck gently. “I’m going to find Mr. Adler, all right?”

“But—”

“Don’t worry about Adler anymore, I’ll handle him.”

“Okay.”

Peter sighed. There were a lot of things that *could* have happened when he walked into the detention center today, but this? This wasn’t even in the ballpark of what he’d considered.

He had to call Hughes—and Elizabeth.

Neal George Caffrey had never really considered himself the typical submissive. He’d run away from home at sixteen and registered as a Dom with no one the wiser. He’d always thought of it as his greatest con. His ability to pass had never been an issue. He’d started out simply enough, partnering up with Mozzie for bond fraud had seemed like the best option at the time.

And then Mozzie put him in the path of Vincent Adler.

It wasn’t Mozzie’s fault. He’d been under the same assumption everyone else was, that Neal was a Dom. He couldn’t have known that Adler would see right through Neal’s posturing. Couldn’t know that the Dom would leverage Neal’s defining father issues and deep-seated need for attention and praise against him. Couldn’t know that Adler would use Neal’s attachment to Kate against him.

And in the end, no one could have anticipated how Adler leaving, hiding Kate away, and abandoning Neal, would affect him.

Not even Neal. He felt—useless. Worthless. If there was one thing Adler was good at, it was twisting a person’s own desires against them and Adler had used Kate against Neal. Demanding more and more from him, toying with him, promising him he’d give Kate back

only to tear her away again after a brief glimpse or a few words on a phone call and through it all Neal had thought they were *both* Adler's victims.

Until now.

Until Kate sat across from him in the visitation room and smiled at him.

"What?" he asked, begging for repetition.

"I said, we're done." Her smile was cruel. "You're so pathetic. All you had to do was get what he wanted and you failed." She shook her head. "I knew I should have told him to use Keller in the first place."

"You don't mean that." *You can't mean that.* "I love you."

"I never loved you." She stood up. "If you know what's good for you, you'll keep your mouth shut about Adler, before you lose everything else."

She made to leave, Neal stood up, smacking his fist against the glass. "No, Kate! Please!"

"Goodbye, Neal."

"Kate!"

"Someone want to tell me *why* you let Kate Moreau see him?" Peter asked, trying to rein in his temper. Neal Dropped again, no surprise there after Moreau's visit.

"She was on his list of approved visitors," the officer said, somewhat desperate.

"Well from now on the only people on that list are myself and Mr. Caffrey's lawyer unless prior permission is given—*by me*, are we clear?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good."

Peter was pretty sure Neal wasn't supposed to get visitors *period*, but he wasn't going to argue about that now, he was just there to escort the kid to the Dynamic Support wing at Memorial West. Regardless of that issue, he went ahead and called Jones to have Kate Moreau picked up. He needed to know *exactly* what she'd said to Neal.

Neal was pretty sure he was at his limit for dealing with emotions for—well, the next ten years if he had anything to say about it. At least he was in a hospital rather than a holding cell now, which was infinitely easier to break out of. He was feeling better, the headache was gone and he was left with only mildly jumpy, which was easy enough to hide.

In theory, he wasn't so sure about practice as he spilled his cup of water over the tray of questionable hospital food when Mozzie slipped into the room dressed in scrubs and a doctor's white coat.

"Mozzie," Neal snapped. "What the hell."

"Sorry, *mon frère*, you're kind of jumpy."

"You're one to talk," Neal replied. "What are you doing here?"

"I came to see if you were all right, obviously." Mozzie shook his head. "Neal, why didn't you tell me you were a sub? I mean, I *never* would have considered going after Adler if I'd known." He frowned, stepping up to the side of the bed. "I mean, that guy has a reputation, if you know what I mean."

"Yeah, I do." Neal swallowed.

Mozzie's frown deepened and he took Neal's hand gently. "I know I'm not—not exactly the person to talk to about any of this. I can't really understand what you're going through and I can't support you the way a Dom could." Mozzie was resolutely Neutral for every Dynamic test he'd ever received.

"It's okay, Moz. You—there's nothing you could have done. I was obsessed with Kate and you tried to tell me to stop and I couldn't and it wasn't...it wasn't just about Kate." Neal sighed. "Adler had me pretty twisted up. If he snapped his fingers, I'd come running." He shook his head.

"Oh, kid." Mozzie pulled Neal into a hug. "It's okay. I mean, I don't normally approve of the government but...the DSR has good people. You have to get help, you know that, right?"

Neal nodded, trying to pretend he wasn't crying. "I don't know what's going to happen to me, Moz. Agent Burke asked me a bunch of questions about Adler and Kate and...I don't know why exactly."

Mozzie pulled back, giving his friend a *Seriously?* expression. "Neal, if Adler used his Dynamic to push you into doing things you can't be held accountable for those crimes. Sure, they can get you on bond fraud—*maybe*, but the bonds you sold that they caught you for were while you with Adler. You could get out of going to prison."

Neal's eyes narrowed. "Are you serious?"

"I am. So you answer their questions and give them what they want. You might have flown too close to the sun this time, Icarus, but we *might* be able to keep you out of a cage at least."

Not going to prison would be good. Neal thought. *Really good.*

"Okay, Mozzie."

"In the meantime, be good. Okay?"

Neal nodded. "I'll do my best."

"Good." Mozzie paused on his way to the door. "And on a side note, I might not be a Dom, I might not have that protective instinct, but I'll tell you now—If I get my hands on Adler before the suits do—they'll *never* find him."

Neal blinked, taken slightly aback by his friend's tone. "Really?"

"He hurt you, bad, and I let it happen." Mozzie shook his head. "I won't let that happen again."

Neal exhaled sharply. "Thank you Mozzie."

Mozzie nodded and slipped out of the room.

Neal's next visitor was a counselor—Marta—accompanied by Agent Burke and Agent Jones, the latter of which waited out in the hall.

"Hello, Neal," Marta smiled. "How are you feeling today?"

"Feel a lot better if I knew what was happening."

Peter nodded. "I can understand that." He stopped at the end of the bed. "We picked up Kate Moreau and she started talking. She told us that she and Adler were working together to coerce you." Peter frowned. "With her testimony and a truly incriminating string of phone calls and emails in addition to the employment records we have for your Nick Halden alias; we have a direct timeline of Adler's influence."

"Okay." Neal frowned. "That doesn't exactly clear me of—my alleged bond forgery."

"No, but we both know that your Dynamic makes this different." Peter took a breath. "The DOJ is willing to cut you a deal. Four years of supervision and community service—working for the white collar division to help catch your....peers."

"I feel like there's an addendum in there somewhere."

"You would be right."

Marta took over the conversation there. "You would be required to have a Dominant guardian, Neal. The DOJ and the FBI have been in conference with the DSR and we've all come to the conclusion that the best person to fill that role is Agent Burke."

Neal blinked. "Really?"

Marta nodded. "He's going to be your supervisor within the FBI as it is, and he tested well within your range for compatibility." She smiled gently. "And you do already know him. That usually helps."

Neal nodded somewhat absently before looking at Peter. “What does your wife think about this?”

“Elizabeth is supportive,” Peter replied. “This is a purely platonic arrangement, and she knows that. I think she’s even looking forward to having another submissive to keep me on my toes.” He smiled. “You do keep me on my toes.”

Neal managed a smile.

Seeing the smile made Peter feel a bit better about where Neal was mentally. “You aren’t going to get a better deal, kid,” Peter said. “Of course, the supervision comes with a tracking anklet, but you get a whole two mile radius, which is a lot for Manhattan.”

“And the DSR has found someone for you to stay with,” Marta said. “She’s a widowed submissive, does a lot of volunteer work with us and when she heard about you she volunteered to house you.”

Neal was—overwhelmed. He was also pretty sure Peter was right. He *wasn’t* going to get a better deal. If he didn’t take it, he’d probably end up in prison for four years and prison for a submissive, as much as submissive rights had advanced and there were protections in place, wasn’t a pretty picture.

He didn’t want to end up there. There was really only one thing to say.

“Where do I sign?”

Snow White and Her Seven Little Men

Chapter Summary

Neal works his first case. Spoilers for the pilot herein.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“So, you’re picking Neal Caffrey up today,” Elizabeth eyed her husband. “How do you feel about that?”

Peter sipped his coffee. “Nervous.” He glanced at her. “You do know this is the kid who sent me birthday cards? Who sent a surveillance team champagne? He’s not *just* a sub in need of help, he’s also an incredibly smart con artist with a questionable moral compass.”

Elizabeth wrinkled her nose and leaned down to kiss him. “You’re his moral compass now.”

“Great.” He sighed and then smiled at her. “I’ll need your help with him.”

“I know.” She smiled. “And I will. Now. I have to go look at venue for Marcy Watkins, I’ll see you at dinner.”

Peter nodded. “See you at dinner.”

Neal wasn’t sure what he thought of the tracking anklet, but he was sure that he didn’t like the sub-band on his wrist, it was practically mocking him. The thin band of leather was a reminder that in the end, he’d failed in his most important con. Also, he was wearing FBI sweats and no one looked good in sweats.

He’d be happy to no longer have to eat hospital food though. There was nothing good about hospital food.

“Neal?”

Neal looked up from the band. “Peter.”

“You ready to go?”

“Yeah.”

“Let’s see it then.” Peter gestured at Neal’s leg.

Neal sighed and pulled up the pant leg, showing off the tracker.

“Fantastic. Let’s go.” Peter nodded toward the door.

Neal stood up. “Can we stop for lunch?”

Peter looked the kid over. “Sure. We’ll get burgers.”

Neal was too hungry to really complain about that, and followed Peter out of the hospital.

Neal hadn’t been sure what to expect when he was told he’d be “housed”. He definitely *hadn’t* been expecting a three story mansion.

“Wow.” He raised his eyebrows. “This is—*wow*.”

“Yeah, I didn’t pick it,” Peter said.

Peter headed up to the front door and knocked, a maid answered.

“Peter Burke and Neal Caffrey for June Ellington,” Peter said.

“Of course, she’s expecting you.”

Neal’s eyes got wider as they headed inside the exceptionally well decorated home to a sitting room with a piano. A well-dressed, older black woman was waiting for them with coffee and a bright smile.

“Hello, Agent Burke, Neal—I’m June Ellington.” She shook each of their hands. “It’s a pleasure to meet you both.”

“Thank you for opening your home to me, June,” Neal replied. “I must admit I’m somewhat surprised.”

“Well, my Byron wasn’t the straightest of arrows and I stood by him.” She smiled. “Now, sit down and we’ll have some coffee. I believe Agent Burke has some t’s to cross.”

“Yeah we have to go over rules.” He glanced at Neal.

Neal made a face.

They settled around the coffee table and June poured the coffee.

“This is delicious,” Neal said after taking a sip.

“Thank you.”

Peter raised his eyebrows after his own first sip. “Wow, that is good.” He took a breath. “Mrs. Ellington—”

“Please call me June.”

Peter nodded. “June, you received the packet and signed off on it, correct?”

“I did. I understand he’s on a tracking anklet, he has a two-mile radius and mandatory therapy sessions weekly.”

Neal made a face.

“And now the rules,” Peter took another drink of coffee. “Neal, I know you read them but this is the time for you to ask questions.”

“Okay.” He raised an eyebrow. “Go on then.”

“Obviously *don’t break the law*, is at the top of the list.”

“Obviously.” Neal sighed. “I don’t really have anything to say about that one.”

“You *shouldn’t* have anything to say about it,” Peter agreed. “Two, you do *not* lie to me or anyone else.”

“What if I have to lie to someone while helping with a case?” Neal gave Peter a look. “You know, play a part?”

“If it’s *for a case*, you’ll have more leeway.”

Neal hid a smile and shrugged. “I guess that’s okay.”

June smiled.

“Three, there will be no contact between you and your criminal colleagues.”

Mozzie’s not going to like that. Neal frowned. “They’re not all bad influences,” he argued. “You could argue that *all* of my friends are criminals, in which case you’re cutting me off from my support structure.”

Peter sighed. “Fine. You can submit them to me for approval.”

Neal made a face. “Fine.”

“Four, if you are not working on case you will be back to your apartment by eleven every night.”

“Seriously?” Neal leaned back. “I’m not a child.”

“No, but you need to show me you can play by the rules I set and then *we’ll see* about giving you a longer leash.” Peter gave him a sharp look. “Understand?”

Neal sighed. “Yeah.”

“Okay. Last one, you *will* attend your therapy sessions.”

Neal made a face. He'd done some therapy sessions at the hospital, Marta was a nice enough counselor, but he didn't really like opening up to people. He didn't want to talk about Adler or Kate. He didn't want to show off the emotional scars they'd left behind. He was fine with letting them scab over on their own. He could deal with it on his own.

"Neal," Peter prompted.

Neal blinked. "Uh—right. Of course. Therapy." He nodded.

Peter had a feeling Neal was going to fight him about this at some point but for now he was willing to let it slide.

"All right, I think that's everything. You get the weekend to settle in and I will pick you up on Monday for work." Peter stood up. "It was lovely to meet you, June." He smiled at her.

"Keep an eye on our boy."

"Of course, Agent Burke." June escorted him out and returned to Neal, smiling gently.

"Would you like to see your rooms?"

"Rooms?" Neal stood up.

"Well, it's an apartment really." She smiled. "Follow me."

Neal wasn't all that surprised to find Mozzie in his apartment the following day, sitting at the kitchen table drinking wine.

"Moz."

"Neal." Mozzie smiled. "You lucked out my friend. June is a delight."

Neal smiled and sat down. "She's a wonderful person."

"And I see she upgraded your wardrobe." Mozzie nodded in Neal's direction, eyeing the suit he was wearing.

"Her late-husband had great taste," Neal agreed. "You know, Peter made it a rule, I'm not supposed to associate with you without his permission."

"And that's going to stop you? Really?"

Neal laughed. "Yeah, you're right about that." He took a deep breath. "We'll just have to be careful."

"In the meantime, I see you've repaired your metaphysical armor." Mozzie frowned. "You know, playing a role is what got you into this. You should—I don't know—try to let yourself *need* things."

"It's not like I can just go to Peter and tell him I need a hug, Moz."

“I think the whole concept of him being your guardian means you can do exactly that.” He gave Neal a look. “I might not like Suits, but he seems to be an honorable sort. *Do you* need a hug?”

Yes. Neal wanted more than a hug though, he wanted to be *held, reassured*. “I’m fine, Moz.”

“Liar. Come on, we can settle on the couch.” Mozzie stood up. “And I’m not taking no for an answer.”

“You aren’t a Dom, Moz.”

“Maybe not, but you need touch, so move it.”

Neal sighed, but was unwilling to argue, following Mozzie to the couch and letting his friend settle him. It wasn’t quite as effective as it would have been with a Dom, but Mozzie was right, he needed human contact. Neal sighed. *Maybe Mozzie’s right about Peter to*. Neal did *know* that Peter was a good man, a good Dom and husband. He probably *could* ask for comfort he just—he couldn’t help remembering Adler.

Everything had been good in the beginning. Vincent had been kind. It hadn’t lasted. He could still remember what Adler had said to him the last time he’d gone to him looking for comfort.

Don’t be so needy.

Don’t be such a child.

Handle it yourself.

It only got worse. By the time Adler left the country, the only time Neal could remember the man touching him was when he hit him. *Will Peter use a belt too?* Neal had no reference beyond Adler’s behavior. He’d been too young to see his parents interact as a Dom and sub before his father died, and Aunt Ellen had never known Neal was a sub. He’d buried it down deep, recognizing it as a weakness the neighborhood bullies could exploit and then—well then he’d run away.

He wasn’t sure how Peter would react if he found out Mozzie had stopped by but—right then, he thought it was worth it. He needed Mozzie enough to risk taking a beating.

Mozzie was the only family he had left.

Monday arrived. Neal put on the Devore June had first shown him, cocked a hat at a jaunty angle and tried to project as much confidence as possible. Peter picked him up right on time.

“You look like a cartoon,” he remarked.

Neal grinned, flipping his hat.

Peter rolled his eyes. “Okay, Dino, let’s go.”

“Come on, I look good and you know it.”

On the one hand, Peter was glad to see Neal smiling, confident but on the other—he knew most of it was just a front. A thin outer shell to protect his still raw inner core. The smile did look genuine though, and that was promising.

“Do we have a case?” Neal asked, following Peter out to the car.

“You ever hear of a guy who calls himself the Dutchman?”

Neal smiled. “Oh, this should be fun.”

Peter placed Neal at a desk, told Jones to keep an eye on him and handed over all of the current files they had on the Dutchman before heading in to talk to Hughes.

“How’s it going?” Hughes asked, nodding toward the young man currently chatting up Jones.

“He seems happy to dive into the work, although I suspect it’s mostly to distract himself.” He sighed. “We have to keep track of anything that triggers him and make sure he gets to therapy but, you know he’s a tough kid.”

Hughes nodded. “Keep him busy—and try to keep him in line. I know he’s a victim, but he’s also a world-class criminal.”

“Yeah.” Peter shook his head. “I think he enjoys being a contradiction.”

There was a knock on the door. “Hey boss, we’ve got a hit on Snow White at JFK,” Diana said. “Customs is holding a book dealer named Tony Field for us.”

Peter nodded. “Okay. Grab Caffrey.”

Diana smirked. “Will do.”

Neal found himself caught up in the job easily. Bond forgery was, after all, something he was intimately familiar with. He and Mozzie spent an evening examining every inch of the forged bond they picked up from the National Archive until he found a clue.

On impulse, he took a cab to Peter’s house the next morning. Really, it was time he met Elizabeth anyway. He probably should have considered calling first.

Neal felt a bit nervous knocking at the front door of a house he’d staked out a dozen times during his run from the feds. He’d *seen* Elizabeth before, sent her flowers a couple times. This was different.

The petite brunette smiled when she opened the door. “Hello there,” she blinked. “You must be Neal Caffrey.”

“Elizabeth Burke, I presume.” Neal nodded. “I’m here to see Peter, obviously.” He held up a bouquet. “For you.”

“Thank you.” She smiled brighter. “They’re beautiful. Come on in, we can wait for Peter in the living room.”

Meanwhile, upstairs, Peter was shaving when his phone went off. He frowned when he recognized the phone number and sighed. “Yeah, this is Agent Burke.”

Neal and Elizabeth looked up at the sound of footsteps on the stairs, spotting Peter looking somewhat—annoyed—and still on the phone. The man sighed, “It’s okay, Caffrey is with me—yeah—yeah—I’ll see you at the office.” He hung up the phone and stalked into the living room, propping a hand on his hip.

“Hey, Peter,” Neal smiled a bit nervously.

“You’re on my couch,” Peter said. “You activated your tracker.”

“Did you really put Elizabeth under surveillance before you asked her out?” Neal raised his eyebrows.

“It was sweet, really,” Elizabeth added.

Peter made a face. “I should ground you.”

Neal decided to cut off that sort of thinking. “I know who the Dutchman is.”

“Enlighten me.”

“Curtis Hagan.”

Jones stopped Peter on his way back from the warehouse Hagan was using to print the bonds. “So, you know that guy Neal bummed a cigarette from?”

“Squirrely guy in glasses?” Peter asked.

“Yeah.” Jones nodded. “I’m pretty sure he’s a contact. He wasn’t exactly subtle. I tried running his face but—he’s off the grid. You should ask Neal about him.”

Peter nodded. “Will do. At least he’s using his contacts to *help* rather than hinder the investigation.”

Jones nodded.

“Keep looking though, I’d like to have some idea who the guy is.”

“Will do, boss.”

Peter sighed. He'd expected Neal to break the rules, he was just sort of hoping he wouldn't do it quite so soon.

While Neal's methodology for catching Hagan red-handed had been a bit questionable, Peter couldn't deny it's effectiveness. The kid *had* read the Warrant Law book, come up with a plan and executed it to catch their murderous bond forger.

Of course, he'd also put himself in a bit more danger than Peter liked in order to do it. After hours of paperwork, Peter headed for Neal's desk. He'd handed him some mortgage fraud cases to look through after writing his report. It was pretty boring work, but at least it kept him busy.

"Neal."

Neal blinked. "Hey, Peter, what's up?"

"You're coming over to my place for dinner tonight, remember? Elizabeth insisted."

"Oh, right." Neal closed the file he'd been looking at and set it aside. "Let's go."

Peter waited patiently for Neal to slip on his suit jacket and grab his hat. He walked him the elevator, a hand on Neal's shoulder. He couldn't help but notice Neal had been a bit...off, the longer the day went. His mask slipping. Peter had to wonder how long it had been since someone put Neal into subspace. Properly, that is. The kid probably needed it.

I could be in over my head here. At least when they got back to the house, Elizabeth would be there for a second opinion. He was going to need the back up.

They'd settled into comfortable post-dinner conversation over coffee and pie. Neal had managed to fix his mask back into place for Elizabeth, but it was starting to slip again. Elizabeth exchanged a look with Peter and then glanced at Neal.

"Neal, you look beat. Do you want to stay here tonight?" she smiled at him.

"I wouldn't want to impose."

"It's no imposition."

"It's better if you don't argue with her," Peter said. "Trust me."

Neal smiled. The dinner had given him more insight into Peter and Elizabeth's relationship. He'd known Peter loved his wife, and he knew from the silver and gold braided chain collar with a diamond set loop and gold tags she wore that Peter had help picking it out and that as his submissive, she was precious to him.

He'd never seen Peter raise his voice to her. Never seen Peter threaten her. Never seen her flinch away or do anything that indicated she was afraid of him. She spoke her mind. He'd never thought Peter was a bad Dom but—it was more reassuring than he could express to see that Elizabeth was so confident around Peter.

“Okay, I'll stay.”

“Great.” Elizabeth smiled. “Come on, I bet you want a shower and then we can all watch a movie.”

Neal swallowed. “Okay.” He stood up and followed her upstairs while Peter took care of the dishes.

After his shower, Neal padded downstairs in borrowed pajamas—he was trying to live with the fact that they were branded with Peter's favorite baseball team—and Elizabeth beckoned him over to the sofa.

“How do you feel about *The Name of the Rose*?” Elizabeth asked.

“Umberto Eco is a favorite,” Neal replied. “And Sean Connery isn't bad.”

“Okay.” She smiled and patted the seat next to her. “Come here.”

Neal froze, biting his lip.

“It's okay.” She nodded encouragingly. “Cuddle with me.”

Neal took a moment before crossing the room and sinking into the seat next to her, a bit stiff until she put an arm around him. He let out a breathe he hadn't realized he'd been holding.

“You okay?” she asked after a minute.

“Yeah.” His voice cracked. “This is good.”

Peter walked in a few minutes later with popcorn, taking the last seat on the other side of Neal and giving him a questioning look. After a few seconds, Neal nodded and Peter put an arm around him. Elizabeth started the movie and as the minutes ticked by, Neal slowly relaxed against Peter.

Peter watched the sub closely and picked up a piece of popcorn, glancing at Elizabeth. She nodded. Peter held the popcorn up to Neal's lips. Neal blinked, and took the popcorn, crunching and swallowing before he looked at Peter.

“This okay, kid?” Peter asked.

After a moment, Neal nodded and they settled into an easy rhythm for the rest of the movie, Neal drifting gently until the movie ended. He was half-asleep by then, but he was still a bit underweight and while tall, not a great burden for Peter. The Dom managed to get Neal up the stairs and into bed, Elizabeth watching from the doorway as Peter pushed the hair from Neal's face, tucking him in and padding back out the hall.

“He *almost* went down,” Elizabeth whispered. “Just from that.”

Peter nodded. “He puts on a good front but...he needs this more than he’ll ever admit.”

“Well, I know what it’s like to want to do everything on your own.” Elizabeth wrinkled her nose. “But he has you and me now. We just have to be patient, right?”

Peter smiled, leaning down to kiss her gently. “I am the luckiest man in the world, you know that?”

“I do.” She grinned.

“Brat,” he teased, giving her a light smack on the bottom before they headed off to bed.

Chapter End Notes

I'll be skipping around within the timeline a bit, but I'll tell you what episodes I'm using in the chapter summary.

Don't worry, Neal's going to find exactly what happens when he breaks Peter's rules in the next chapter, but I thought our boy needed some fluff.

The Portrait

Chapter Summary

Contains spoilers for The Portrait. Some dialogue from episode.

There is a spanking in this chapter. There's plenty of build up to give you warning.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Neal woke up the next morning somewhat uncertain where he was. He had a moment of panic before remembering vaguely Peter putting him to bed the night before and then flushing. *Like a little kid.*

“Hey, Neal,” Elizabeth said from the doorway. “You sleep okay?”

“Uh—yeah.” He slipped out of bed. “Sorry about falling asleep on the couch.”

“It’s okay.” She smiled. “Breakfast is in twenty. Peter is walking Satchmo at the moment but I think he wants to talk to you after breakfast.”

“About?”

She shrugged. “He was thin on details, but I’m sure it’ll be fine.”

Neal bit his lip, glancing down at the floor before looking back at her. “I—can I ask you a question?”

“Of course, sweetie.”

“I—if I break a rule.” He paused, making a face. “Okay. *When* I break a rule, what’s he going to do?”

“Well, it depends on how badly you broke it and which rule.” She made a face. “Little things? You’ll probably end up with a box of mortgage fraud cases to work on. You could end up grounded, which would be here, not at June’s. And of course he’ll spank you.”

“With his hand or...” Neal bit his lip again.

Elizabeth stepped forward, taking Neal’s hands in hers. “If you *really* mess up he *might* break out a hair brush for the last part of the spanking.”

“Not—not a belt?” Neal’s voice cracked, his eyes wide.

Elizabeth only took a few seconds to eye the vulnerability written all over his face before pulling him into her arms. “No, sweetheart, *never*. Discipline is meant to *help*. Help you let go. Help you forgive yourself. Did—did you last Dom hurt you, Neal?”

He nodded.

“Peter won’t do that, I promise.” She pulled back slightly, brushing his hair away from his face and getting up on her toes to kiss his forehead. “Go wash up, okay? I’m making pancakes. After breakfast we can hang out on the couch for as long as you want, okay?”

“Okay.” He nodded and slipped off to the bathroom.

Elizabeth took a deep breath and headed downstairs, she needed to talk to Peter about this. He needed to know Neal was going to be—delicate, when it came to discipline. She thought he probably already had an idea but knowing specifics would help.

Peter was just coming inside when she got downstairs, unhooking Satchmo’s leash and hanging it by the door.

“Hey, El.” He smiled. “Is he up yet?”

“He is.” She padded over and kissed him. “He told me something.” She took a breath. “About Adler, I think.”

“Oh.” He glanced down at her. “What did he say?”

“He asked me what you would do if he broke the rules. I talked to him and—then he asked me if you would use a belt.” She frowned. “He looked scared, Peter.”

Peter took a step back, wiping his hand over his face. “Geeze.” He shook his head. “I knew Adler was abusive I just—he didn’t really leave marks; you know?” Peter sighed. “I wish could find the bastard but after he visited Neal at the holding center he vanished. We haven’t found any trace of him and...I *want* him.

“Part of me wants to shoot him but most of me wants to put him behind bars.”

“If anyone can find him, you can,” Elizabeth reassured. “Was your conversation with Neal going to involve discipline?”

“I hadn’t decided. He put himself in danger during this case and I’m not happy about it but I *also* didn’t make it a rule so...” He shrugged. “It’s going to be a rule *now* obviously. I just thought he had more of a self-preservation instinct than that. He’s also been associating with one of his criminal friends.”

“Which *is* one of your rules.”

“Yeah.”

The sound of footsteps on the stairs put a pause on their conversation. Elizabeth gave Peter a significant look and headed back to the kitchen.

“Hello, Neal,” Peter greeted as the kid stepped off the stairs.

“Peter.” Neal glanced down at Satchmo and smiled, leaning over to rub the dog’s ears. “Hey, Satchmo.”

“You sleep okay?” Peter asked.

“Yeah.” Neal nodded, straightening and heading for the kitchen, Peter following after him. “That bed is surprisingly comfortable.”

“El’s father is a touchy guy, after his last visit I bought a new guest bed,” Peter admitted.

“Coffee?” Neal asked.

Peter considered that for a brief moment before making a decision. “You can have coffee if you drink some orange juice first.”

Neal blinked. It was definitely an *order* but the tone was gentle. “Yes, Peter.” It wasn’t Sir, but he wasn’t sure if he’d ever be able to call anyone Sir without thinking about Adler and he didn’t want to think about Adler.

Peter smiled and ruffled Neal’s hair.

Neal made a face, “Hey,” he shot Peter a look.

“Come on, kid, let’s get that orange juice.”

After breakfast and a good hour cuddling with Elizabeth on the couch, Peter insisted it was time for he and Neal to have a talk. Elizabeth took that as her cue to take Satchmo for a walk.

“So, first off,” Peter started, “we need to talk about you handing yourself over to Hagan’s goons—one of which you *knew* had killed a man.”

Neal made a face, fiddling with the hem of his shirt. “That was pretty dangerous, I guess.”

“Yes it was.” Peter sighed. “I didn’t think, *do not put yourself in unnecessary danger*, needed to be a rule, but I think it needs to be now. Your sense of self-preservation is a bit shaky.”

“I understand.”

“Good. Then we can move on to the rule you did break.”

“Mozzie.”

“Is that his name?”

“Pretty much.” Neal frowned. “Look, I know you said I had to let you vet them first but—Mozzie isn’t just a friend, Peter. He’s like family. I need him.” Neal glanced at his lap.

“Please, I can’t *not* see Mozzie.”

Neal look as vulnerable as he had in the hospital, shoulders slumped and mouth drawn into a thin line.

Peter sighed again. “I want to meet him, okay?”

Neal nodded quickly. “Yeah. Okay.”

“Okay.” Peter reached out and took Neal’s hand in his, squeezing gently. “Elizabeth talked to me about what the two of you discussed this morning.”

“I figured she might.”

Peter nodded. “I *promise* I will never, *ever* use a belt, Neal. Okay? If I’m spanking you, you’re going to be in my lap and I’ll be using my hand—or if you do something *truly* beyond the pale, you could end up with some swats from a hairbrush, but I’ll never go beyond what you need. Okay?”

He promised. Neal took a breath. “Okay.” He paused. “Can I ask you something?”

“Of course.”

“Why—why did you agree to be my Dominant guardian?” Neal glanced up at him.

“Because you deserved a second chance. Because underneath it all, I think you’re a good kid and I want to give you the opportunity to see that for yourself.”

Neal swallowed, biting on the inside of his cheek. *I am not going to cry.*

Before he’d even really made the conscious realization that he was, in fact, crying, Neal found himself wrapped in Peter’s arms, a hand rubbing slow circles in the middle of his back.

“It’s okay,” Peter said. “I’ve got you, you can let go. Take all the time you need.”

Neal grabbed hold of Peter’s shirt, and for the first time in what felt like years, he just let himself go. Peter just held him, whispering soft words of praise and rubbing his back before shifting his hand up to card his fingers through Neal’s hair. After a few minutes, Peter shifted tug pull Neal into his lap. The sub squeaked a soft sound in surprise, but settled back down against Peter’s shoulder a few seconds later.

Once he stopped crying, he realized how *nice* this felt. How good last night and this morning—all of it—felt. He forgot how good it could be.

If only he could silence the horrible voice in the back of his head that was definitely Kate, telling him it wouldn’t last, that he didn’t deserve it that Adler only treated him the way he had because Neal was a terrible sub. Not like Kate. Kate was perfect. *Why did I love her?*

Something to talk to the therapist about at his appointment next week, no doubt.

“Do you want to go down for a bit?” Peter asked quietly. “You’re pretty close as it is, kneeling would probably do it—and I think you need it.”

Neal blinked, definitely hazy and nodded.

“Okay, down you go, bud.” Peter knocked a cushion onto the floor and carefully helped Neal down, resting a hand in his hair and petting gently. Neal sighed softly, head leaning against Peter’s leg as he drifted down the last few mental leagues into proper subspace, a smile on his face.

Elizabeth found them like that when she got back and smiled to see Neal absolutely relaxed and calm. She hadn’t expected it. Satchmo, well trained to leave humans be that were kneeling, headed for the kitchen and Elizabeth sat down next to Peter. “Everything went okay then?” she whispered.

“Yeah.” He smiled. “Baby steps, you know?”

“Yeah—he looks so young.”

“He *is* young, but I know what you mean.” Peter sighed. “El, if Neal needs more supervision—more of this, would you be okay with him staying here on weekends?”

“Honestly? I was going to suggest it.” She kissed his cheek. “He’s too thin and he *needs* a positive Dominant influence. Weekends here are a good start and if it turns out that he’s not doing well living with June, if he needs to, he can live here.” She looked Peter in the eye. “I don’t know what it is about him but I just...I want him to be okay.”

Peter melted a bit at this further demonstration of the size of El’s heart. “I love you.”

“I love you too.”

Peter grudgingly gave Neal permission to keep hanging around with Mozzie so long as the strange little con artist didn’t lead him down the wrong path. Things seemed to be going pretty well actually. The weekends at the Burkes *were* helping, though Neal probably wouldn’t admit that if asked directly. Mozzie was still trying to track down Adler and Kate had vanished into the web of Federal Witness Protection.

Neal managed to stay just on the side of right as they caught a murderous currency forger, found a magic bible and cleared Captain John Mitchell’s name. Things seemed to be going pretty well.

Even Neal thought things were going well, of course, that was partly because he’d seduced his therapist’s receptionist, gotten into her computer and given himself a referral to a new therapist—that didn’t exist. Even Mozzie didn’t know about that but Neal had *tried* the first couple weeks. He just, he didn’t want to be looked at like he was broken.

So what if he was having nightmares? At least his rooms were far enough away from June’s that he didn’t wake her up when he woke up, swear soaked and hoarse, teetering on the edge of a Drop, thanking all of the pharmaceutical gods for his Consedol prescription. It made him

a bit hyper but he could live with that. Neal managed to put himself together in time for work, Peter meeting him upstairs on the balcony.

“Morning, Peter. Coffee?”

“No time.” He handed Neal a file. “It’s a Haustenberg.”

Neal’s eyes widened. “I’d like to meet the person who kept a Haustenberg over their mantle.”

“Well, then let’s go.”

“You know, Haustenberg’s are rare,” Neal said as they drove over. “Not a lot of them made it out of Hungary after the war.”

“Yeah, you know rare can make if valuable, *very* valuable.” Peter glanced at him.

“What are you looking at me for?” Neal protested.

“Why do you think?” Peter looked at him again.

“I didn’t steal it.”

“I know you didn’t steal it, but you do like paintings. I’m worried if we do find it, it might be too much temptation for you.”

“I can handle temptation.” Neal paused. “Wait—you said you know I didn’t steal it—you checked my anklet.”

“I check your tracking data every day,” Peter replied.

Neal huffed, turning away from the man.

“What, are you going to sulk now?” Peter raised an eyebrow.

“You don’t trust me.”

“What did Reagan say? Trust but verify.”

Neal turned back to Peter, “That was also the motto of the Soviet Secret Police.”

A cab changed lanes in front of them and Peter was forced to put on the brakes.

Neal made a face. “Maybe you should focus on driving, Peter.”

Peter gave him a look. “I can multi-task.”

“I’ll believe that when I see it.”

They met Julianna at her home, the small framed, pretty blonde submissive wasn't Bonded, there was a thick leather sub-band around her wrist. She led them upstairs, somewhat surprised the FBI was getting involved. "That's where it was," she pointed at a spot on the wall that was brighter than the surrounding walls. "I have class on Tuesdays, but the instructor let us out early. I came in here and there was this—*monster* here and he shoved me up against the wall."

"He hurt you?" Peter asked, his protective instincts kicking in.

"Yeah. I hit him in the face and he said if I did again he would kill me."

"What'd you do?" Neal asked.

"I hit him again."

Neal grinned. *I like her*. It was always nice to see subs with a strong backbone, and she oozed confidence.

Julianna's Uncle Gary interrupted them, coming down the stairs and Peter asked Julianna for a photo of the painting. Alone for a moment, Peter and Neal came to the obvious conclusion that the painting's theft had been an inside job. Peter headed downstairs to talk to Gary and Neal stayed to get the photo from Julianna.

"Will that do?" she handed him the photo. "That's my grandmother, and that's the painting behind her."

"You could be her twin."

She smiled brightly. "I'll take that as a compliment. I was named after her. She raised me and after she died she left me the house—and the painting."

"What did your Uncle Gary think about that? I couldn't help notice he seems like a—traditional sort." He glanced at her sub band and then slipped the cuff of his shirt down to show her his own.

"You—you don't look like an FBI agent."

"I'll take that as a compliment," Neal replied with a smile.

"Well, you'd be right. Gary is traditional and he didn't really like that his submissive mother left everything to her submissive grand-daughter but—there's nothing he can do about it."

Peter came up the stairs. "You got the photo?"

Neal nodded.

"Let's go."

Gary had lawyered up—astonishingly fast. Which made him look even more guilty than he already did. Neal made a case for talking to Gary himself to see if they could find out the

name of the man Gary had arranged to steal the painting. He just wasn't allowed to lie or threaten the man.

A tiny challenge, but it gave Neal something to do outside of the office.

And he did enjoy a challenge.

Gerard Dorsett, a high-end loan shark with a bad habit of violent persuasion and firebombing the offices of people that refused to pay up. They spent a few days tracking Dorsett's movements to various galleries around town before arranging a sting with the help Taryn Vandersant, a buyer at the Lambert Gallery.

It did not go as planned.

Administrative Inquiry did not have a good sound to it.

And then things got more complicated when the curator of the Channing claimed Julianna's stolen painting actually belonged to their collection. Neal took an immediate dislike to the pompous Dom, needling him throughout their meeting. They met with Julianna soon after, and an opportune question from Jones left Neal alone with Julianna long enough to ask her about the painting.

"Tell me a story," he started. "How'd she take it? Hypothetically?"

Julianna's eyes narrowed. "Hypothetically? A little black dress, a laced bottle of whiskey and a horny Irish security guard."

"Why'd she take it?" he smiled.

She pulled on a chain around her neck, showing him the locket—the same locket from the painting.

Neal's eyes widened. "She's the girl in the painting."

Julianna nodded.

Okay. Now he *really* didn't like the curator from the Channing.

It was Julianna's revelation, combined with Neal's dislike of the curator added to the inscription clear as day on the back of the painting now in his hands that made his mind up for him.

To my Dearest Julianna. Keep this forever.

He smiled. Well, he wasn't going to let the curator get away stealing the painting from its rightful owner a second time, that was for certain. He left a little clue for Dorsett, wrapped

the painting up and hid the small panel under his jacket.

But then Dorsett escaped before the Feds could catch him.

Neal had a plan though, so when Dorsett called him, he was prepared—mostly. He hadn't expected Dorsett to threaten Taryn, and while the confident, beautiful Domme wasn't his type, he didn't want her to get hurt either.

So he invited Mozzie over for—a second opinion.

“You stole the painting.” Mozzie gave him a look.

“I was going to give it back to Julianna.”

“You're like a child, no sense of consequence.”

Neal gave him a dirty look, turning the painting over. “Would you look at the inscription? The Channing curator said he authenticated the painting before it was stolen. He saw that it belonged to Julianna and chose to ignore it.”

“And you're Robin Hood? And did I forget to mention the part where you *stole the painting*.”

“I didn't think Dorsett would get away,” Neal replied.

“This is because you don't like that guy from the Channing. You did this for spite.”

“I've done things for less,” Neal admitted. “I can't let him go after Taryn.”

“So—what are you going to do?”

Neal knew what he *had* to do. He just—he didn't want to. First though, he had a painting to forge.

Sitting at Peter's dining room table, Elizabeth hovering the living room, Neal tried to find his nerve again. He'd never really felt *guilty* when it came to breaking the law. A submissive with a straighter moral compass would never make it in the conman's world after all, no matter the front they put up but he felt guilty about putting in Taryn in danger.

Not really about the painting. Still, he knew Peter was going to be—disappointed. Probably more than disappointed.

The older man watched him carefully as Neal gathered himself, finally blurting out what he'd come there to say in the first place. “I took the painting.”

Peter sighed, looking forward. “Dammit, Neal.”

“I wasn’t gonna—”

Peter held up his hand to stop him.

“I did it for—”

Peter closed his fingers, holding up his index finger in silent, but clear, *one*.

Neal made a face and looked away, considering before he looked back at Peter. “We could use it to catch Dorsett, he doesn’t know I work for you.”

Peter sighed, rubbing his thumb along his cheek and finally making eye contact with Neal. The submissive shrugged.

“We’ll set it up for tomorrow,” Peter said. “Now—go upstairs to your room and put your nose in a corner.”

Neal flushed, wanting to argue, but faced with Peter’s quiet he couldn’t say a word. He stood up, heading to the stairs with a quick nod in acknowledgement to Elizabeth before heading on up.

Elizabeth sighed and padded over to Peter, putting her hands on his shoulders. “Well, he told you the truth about the painting.”

“Because they threatened Taryn.”

Elizabeth nodded. “It’s a start.”

“Yeah, it’s a start.” Peter sighed, a smile flickering on his lips. “And I can’t—I *have* to spank him for this, El.”

“I know.” She pressed a kiss to his hair.

“I might need you on standby—to help comfort him.”

“I can do that.”

Peter sighed and stood up. “Let’s get this over with.”

Upstairs, Neal was fidgeting in the corner. Alder never put him in the corner. He preferred to leave Neal kneeling for hours at a time on the cold marble floor of his office when he was pissed off about something Neal had done, or failed to do, or failed to do according to Adler’s exacting specifications.

He called this my room, Neal realized. He didn’t yell. He didn’t look happy but he didn’t look like he was going to beat me either.

I have to trust Peter. I’ve trusted him this far.

He didn't turn around when he heard footsteps, or the creak of someone settling on the bed. Neal was kind of glad he'd shown up in slacks and short-sleeved polo rather than a suit.

"Come here, Neal," Peter called from his seat on the bed.

Neal bit his lip and turned around, eyeing Peter nervously.

"Just so we're clear," Peter said after Neal didn't move. "We're on two right now. Don't push it, Neal."

Neal swallowed and closed the distance between them.

"Shoes off."

Neal slipped off the loafers, pushing them off to the side.

"This is what's going to happen," Peter started. "The pants come down now, and once you're over my lap the underwear goes down too. I will ask you questions, and you will answer them. I'm going to use just my hand this time, because you came to me and that took a lot of trust but if you steal something in the future, it won't *just* be my hand. Understand?"

Neal took a moment to process all of that before nodded. "I understand."

"Okay." Peter looked him over. "Do you need help?"

Neal bit the inside of his cheek. He felt frozen. He wanted to follow Peter's instructions but—fear gripped him. After a moment, he managed to softly say, "*Please.*"

"Okay, buddy, it's okay." Peter pulled Neal closer and unbuttoned his trousers. "I know you're scared and I know this is hard, but it won't get easier until you *know* how I'm going to do this."

Neal nodded.

"Okay." Peter tugged Neal's pants down and then took him by the arm, pulling him down over his lap, the bulk of Neal's weight held up by the mattress, legs hanging over the side of the bed. Peter positioned him with care. "I'm going to pull your boxers down now, all right?"

Neal swallowed, pillowing his face in his arms. "*Okay.*"

Peter rubbed Neal's back for a moment before pulling Neal's boxers down. "You're doing really well, buddy." He placed a hand on Neal's bare bottom. "Remember to breathe."

Breathe. Neal nodded. "Okay."

"I want you to know that I'm proud of you for coming to me and telling me what you did wrong," Peter started. "You made a mistake, but you coming here tonight, knowing what would happen—that took a lot of trust."

Neal whined softly.

“Okay, now the hard part. We need to talk about why we’re here.”

Neal shook his head. Peter sighed and patted Neal’s ass in warning before he laid out six hard, even swats. The sub jolted under his hand, but didn’t try to get off Peter’s lap.

“Come on, tell me why we’re here, buddy.”

Neal took a breath. “Because I stole the painting.”

“That’s right, and that’s wrong *why*?”

“Because I broke the law and I put Taryn in danger.”

“Yes you did.” Peter gripped Neal’s waist and started spanking in earnest, keeping a close eye on Neal’s reactions. “You do not break the law, Neal. It’s the first rule I set for you. Yes, I give you leeway when we work cases, but you crossed the line this time.”

Neal whined again, gripping the comforter under his hands tight.

“You’re grounded for the next month,” Peter went on. “No extracurriculars. You want to go somewhere, you go with me or Elizabeth as an escort and you get permission first. Understand?”

Neal shook his head.

Peter swatted the tops of Neal’s thighs. “I asked you a question, young man.”

“Yes, Peter,” Neal spat out. “I understand.”

“Good boy,” Peter gauged Neal’s state and resumed spanking.

Neal sniffed. It had been a long time since someone had taken their hand to his backside, he’d forgotten how painfully effective it could be. Adler’s belt had made him beg for forgiveness he rarely received, but this was different. This was Peter. Peter who was upset with him for breaking the law. Peter who wanted him to be a better person. Peter who was *proud* of him. The guilt he was feeling about Taryn, about disappointing Peter, was driven away in the face of the ever-present proof of Peter’s authority as Neal’s Dominant guardian.

He started to cry. Crying never made Adler stop. Sorry never made Adler stop. Neal had stopped bothering with words with Adler but he knew Peter needed to hear it.

And Neal *was* sorry. He was sorry and he never meant to put Taryn in danger or screw things up for Peter or let Dorsett get away—and he had no idea he’d started saying any of it out loud until he heard Peter reply to him.

“I know, buddy, I know. I forgive you. It’s okay.” Peter had stopped spanking and had started rubbing some of the heat from Neal’s backside. “You’re okay now. We’re okay now.” He pulled Neal’s underwear back up, helping Neal stand before tugging him back down into his lap, letting Neal cry into his shirt, carding his fingers through the dark brown curls.

“I am sorry,” Neal said after he’d calmed down some.

“And I forgive you,” Peter replied. “We’re going to catch Dorsett tomorrow, the painting will go back to the Channing and we’ll put this behind us—okay?”

“Okay.” Neal bit his lip. “I—will you just hold me for a while?”

“Of course I will.” Peter tucked Neal’s head under his chin, scooting back onto the bed further to get more comfortable. “You want El too?”

“Please?” Neal whispered.

“Okay.” Peter beckoned his wife over from the doorway.

She’d peeked in when she heard the spanking stop. El smiled and headed over, slipping into bed and cuddling up next to the pair. “Hey, Neal. You okay, sweetie?”

He nodded. “Yeah—I think I am.”

She pressed a kiss to his forehead. “You want some water?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay. I’ll get you some water and PJ’s.”

“I’m staying the night?” Neal glanced at Peter.

Peter nodded. “We’ll go to your place in the morning for the painting.”

“Okay.” Neal buried his face against Peter’s shoulder and sighed softly. *Peter isn’t Adler*. He felt warm and safe—cared for.

He fell asleep before El got back with the water, slumped boneless next to Peter.

El smiled, smoothing the hair from his face and looked at Peter. “That went better than I expected.”

“Me too,” Peter replied, smiling back. “Now we just have to get through him being grounded.”

El made a face. “I don’t think that’s going to go quite so smoothly.”

“No.” Peter shook his head. “Probably not.”

The second sting went the way it was supposed and to and the FBI recovered the money, the painting and got Dorsett and his muscle. Peter had a moment of panic after handing the painting off to curator from the Channing but the man confirmed it was authentic after a moment of silence.

Meanwhile, Neal visited Julianna. Mozzie had been kind enough to drop the painting off the night before.

“Haustenberg was her father,” Neal handed the locket back to Juliana.

“She was his illegitimate daughter. But he had a family then, in Hungary. It was before the war.”

“How did the Channing get the painting in the first place?” Neal asked.

“He left it to my grandmother but when he died the museum ignored his wished. How do you know they won’t try to take it back?” She glanced up at him, fiddling with the locket.

“Well, then the curator would have to explain that he went against Haustenberg’s wishes in the first place and—he doesn’t want that.” Neal grinned. “Trust me.”

Julianna smiled. “I’m glad you’re on my side.”

“Yeah, well, I have a hard time saying no to pretty girls.”

She laughed. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

Chapter End Notes

So I'm trying to come up with more nicknames Peter can call Neal. Buddy and Kid are pretty canon-compliant and I think he used sport a couple times but I'm not so keen on that one. Lay on the suggestions!

Next up, Neal is grounded and gets his first real clue to Adler's location.

All In

Chapter Summary

Contains spoilers for the episode All In plus some dialogue.

Warning, spanking near the end.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Neal found himself working on a *lot* of mortgage fraud cases. One could almost say that Peter had re-routed every new mortgage fraud the department was given to Neal's desk.

Because he had.

Neal had started to get—irritated. He'd also accumulated a dozen paper cuts and was starting to resent the fact that Satchmo was more likely to be allowed of the house after dark than he was. He wasn't really sure what to do with those feelings. Alder never made him feel frustrated like Peter did. Of course, Neal had always thought putting up with Adler was the price he had to pay to be with Kate. Because Kate needed Adler. Kate needed a Dom and for all his posturing, Neal wasn't one.

Neal was never sexually intimate with Adler; he hadn't been attracted to Adler that way. If he was honest with himself, he wasn't attracted to Doms in that way at all. He never had been. Homodynamic couples weren't shocking these days, but it was definitely not something that he'd go out telling people. At first, he'd thought dating other subs was just a natural thing to do for a con-artist pretending to be a Dom, but that wasn't true.

Sure, he *needed* a Dominant presence in his life, just not in bed.

Which was probably why his current elevator conversation with Peter was going south—in addition to Neal's already frustrated state.

"I'm just saying," Peter said, "Taryn was a nice Domme."

Neal sighed. "She's not my type."

"She's like Lara Croft in khakis."

"Next you'll be telling me she bakes cookies for orphans."

"She does," Peter nodded.

Neal clenched his jaw. "I don't need to be treated like a fucking charity case."

Peter raised his eyebrows. He'd never actually heard Neal swear, so it was something of a surprise. More than that, though, he could see the tension in Neal's posture. The kid had been getting more and more wound up this week. Sure, the first week he'd been grounded hadn't been *great*, but it was pretty clear as they ate into the second that Neal was chafing. Peter furrowed his brow and pressed the stop button on the elevator, grabbed Neal's arm and laid five hard swats across the seat of his pants.

"*Language*," he said, before releasing the younger man and restarting the elevator.

Neal started at him, eyes wide. "You—you just. You—"

Peter gave him a look. "You were gearing up for an argument, so I cut you off."

"But—we're in *public*."

"I stopped the elevator first," Peter replied. "And if you keep giving me an attitude today like you have been this week you and I can take a trip to the quiet rooms."

Neal shook his head. "No, Peter."

"I hope that translates to, *no, Peter I'm not going to keep giving you an attitude.*"

"Yes, Peter."

"Good boy." Peter's frown vanished a moment later and he smiled gently. "I know being grounded is tough, but you need this."

Neal sighed. "Yes, Peter."

When they got off the elevator, the whole floor was in chaos as agents ran around the office, dashing for the open elevators. Hughes gestured for Peter immediately, leaving Neal at his desk with Agent Cruz.

"What's going on?" Neal asked.

"Undercover agent went missing," she replied. "He missed his last contact with his handler and no one's been able to locate him."

Neal raised his eyebrows. "Damn."

"Yeah."

A few minutes later Peter appeared from Hughes' office and pointed at Neal, gesturing for him to come up. Neal sighed and prayed he wasn't about to be saddled with another box of mortgage fraud cases.

"This is Agent Mark Costa; he was posing as drug trafficker who needed to clean some dirty cash through this guy, Lao Shen, money launderer out of China. Costa was working him—"

until last night,” Peter said.

“According to his last contact, Lao was making a pit stop New York for seventy-two hours before he headed back to the homeland,” Hughes added.

Neal frowned. “Why are you telling me this?”

“Nicholas Monroe,” Hughes gave him a sharp look.

“Who?” Neal glanced down at the table, picking up one of the dominoes laid out and fiddling with it.

“Cut the crap, Neal,” Peter said.

“We know he’s one of your aliases,” Hughes said.

Peter raised his eyebrows. “You created him in to launder cash for that Canary Island scam you ran in o-four. Multi-millionaire with a penchant for gambling. Ringing any bells?”

“I may have heard of him.” Neal continued fiddling with the domino. “You willing to offer him full immunity?”

Hughes made a face and sighed. “Done. I don’t give a damn what you did then. I want to find my agent.”

“Then what can Nick do for you?” Neal smiled.

“We want you to contact Lao using this identity. What do you know about Pai Gow?” Hughes asked.

“I know it sounds delicious.”

Peter gave him a look that clearly said *Stop screwing around*.

Neal sighed. “It’s a Chinese version of poker played with dominoes. It’s not really my game.”

“Make it your game,” Peter said firmly. “Lao likes to contact new clients using certain hands or bets. He’ll be playing at underground casino tomorrow night.”

“I’m not going to lie to you, Caffrey,” Hughes added. “This is a dangerous one.”

Neal smiled. “High stakes? I’m in.” *Anything is better than mortgage fraud cases.*

Peter made a face and sighed. Neal was going to put himself in danger again, he just had that feeling.

They set up a base of operations the following night in a Chinatown apartment provided by a trusted CI who owned the restaurant below. They headed inside, slipping off their shoes at the

doorway, though Peter paused for a moment, frowning before he took off his own shoes—and revealed the dog patterned socks he was wearing.

“Are those standard FBI issue?” Neal remarked.

“They were a gift from Elizabeth.”

Neal grinned. “It’s the gift that keeps on giving.”

Peter shook his head and they headed for the card table their host had set up for the surveillance equipment. Neal’s attention was drawn back to Peter when the man managed to upset their host’s little girl.

Neal took the situation in and glanced at Peter, who was trying to explain—badly. “Do you have a business card?” Neal asked, holding out his hand.

“Uh—sure.” Peter pulled one out and handed it to Neal.

Neal drew the little girl’s attention to the card. “Watch this, okay?” With a quick flick of the wrist, he made the card vanish, smiling brightly before he retrieved the card from Peter’s breast pocket.

She smiled shyly as he handed her the card, murmuring thanks in Chinese and letting her father lead her away.

Peter shook his head. “You know, every time you do that I can’t help but check for my wallet.” He patted his breast pocket.

Neal responded by pulling Peter’s wallet—which he’d lifted earlier—from his pocket and handing it over wordlessly.

Peter grimaced and swatted the man. “Behave yourself.”

Neal grinned. Peter was too easy.

“I’m getting really tired of having guns pointed at me tonight,” Neal complained, eyeing the woman in front of him. He’d just been trying to save the op, not get himself killed.

“Nicholas Monroe isn’t the kind of man who would wear a fake watch,” she said. “*Neal Caffrey* on the other hand... You’ve been on our watch list for years.”

“Which one? I’ve been on so many.” He smiled.

“Interpol.”

“You know my name, but I don’t know yours.”

She lowered her gun and he lowered his hands. “Meilin.”

“Why is Interpol interfering with an FBI investigation?”

“It’s the other way around.” She set the gun down.

“You called the cops.”

“If you take Lao, I lose my trail to his boss.”

“Turf war, figures.” He narrowed his gaze. “Why are we here?”

“I want you to let Lao walk.”

Neal shook his head. “I don’t know if you’ve heard but, Peter and I are kind of pals.”

Meilin smiled. “If you botch the deal, I can get you the one thing you want most.”

“What? A new watch?”

She shook her head. “Vincent Adler.”

Neal clenched his jaw.

Meilin smiled again. “I know you want him. I can tell you who’s protecting him—more importantly, I can tell you what it is he wants more than anything else in this world. Taking it away from him would be a fine revenge, don’t you think?”

Neal swallowed. “I think I want that drink now.”

Neal made it back to the operations center in time to overhear Peter telling little Bao how unreliable he was. He took a breath, his story fixed firmly in his head, and interrupted with a smile.

“Nice to know I’m appreciated.”

“I knew you were there,” Peter replied.

Neal smirked. “You know she speaks perfect English, right?”

Bao smiled at Peter. “You’re really weird.” She hopped up, waved at Neal and hurried away into the kitchen.

“How’d you get here?” Peter asked.

“I caught a lift from one of the g-men you put on the hotel.”

“I told them to call me.”

Neal shrugged. “I told them not to bother you. I know you get cranky without your beauty sleep.”

Peter rolled his eyes. “What happened to the watch?”

Calm. Relaxed. “Must have banged it up during the chase. When did it cut out?” Neal frowned, pulling the watch off and handing it to Peter.

“Shortly after you go to the hotel.” Peter eyed the cracked face with a small amount of suspicion.

Neal made a face. “You missed all the good stuff then.”

“Can she make the meet happen?” Peter prodded.

Neal nodded. “She’ll contact me with the time and place.” He stood up and headed over to Jones, who held up his tracking anklet.

“We traced that police tip off,” Cruz said. “Traffic cam footage confirmed it was Meilin Wan.”

“Same girl Caffrey had a sleepover with last night?” Jones asked.

Neal swallowed, heart beat skipping a bit. “You sure about that?”

“Yeah. The carry-company lists a hostess bar on Canal as the place of business,” Cruz added.

Peter stood up frowning. “I want to check it out. I’m curious why Miss Meilin called the cops on Lao’s game—especially if she wants to keep your deal alive.” He glanced at Neal.

Neal blinked.

“You got a problem with that?” Peter prompted.

“No.” He shook his head. “Let’s check it out.” *I am so screwed.*

Peter couldn’t help but think Neal’s behavior was a bit—off. He’d been cagey that morning, the thing with the watch was weird and he’d sort of obviously tried to throw them off Meilin more than once. And then the facial scan came back—Meilin was Interpol.

Peter sighed and texted El to meet for lunch. He needed to talk to someone relatively impartial.

“You think Neal knows?” El asked.

“He spent six hours alone with her in a room, he knows.”

“Maybe he was trying to keep his cover?” El reasoned. “Okay, he knows. But why would he keep it from you? What could Interpol offer him?”

“I’m not sure but...I’m hoping it doesn’t have anything to do with Adler.”

El frowned. “What are you going to do?”

“For now I’m going to wait and see how this shakes out, but I’m pretty sure this is going to blow up in my face.”

El put a hand on his shoulder. “Just make sure you find out *why* he did it, Peter. Maybe he has a good reason.”

Peter sighed. “We’ll just have to wait and see.”

It didn’t take all that long for things to go far enough south that Peter decided to confront Neal. As they were forced to hide from Lao’s men and just—watch—as they took Costa’s body, Peter was only just keeping his temper in check.

“We let them walk right out the door,” Peter snapped.

“At least we’re not dead,” Neal returned.

Peter turned around, Dominance pouring off him. “This isn’t a game, Neal. I think it’s time you and I had a little heart to heart.”

Neal flinched. “About what?”

“Your friend at Interpol.”

Neal’s heart sank into his stomach. *Not good.*

Neal was somewhat grateful to find Elizabeth was home when they arrived, Peter depositing him on the couch with a firm, *Stay*, after a hard swat and heading into the dining room to calm himself down a bit. Elizabeth sat down next to Neal.

“I never lied to Peter,” Neal whispered.

“You did leave a few things out,” she replied.

“She said she had a lead on Adler,” Neal bit the inside of his lip. “We have to find him. *I* have to find him.”

El sighed. “I know. But you can’t keep—bending the truth. Peter wants to trust you. You have to stop giving him reasons not to. And you know he’ll find Adler.”

“I-I know I just...” Neal shook his head.

She shook her head. “You’re going to have to face him, sweetie. You broke the rules.” She squeezed his hand and stood up.

Neal panicked. “No, please—don’t go,” he whispered.

But she was already off to the kitchen, Satchmo at her heels.

Neal swallowed, eyeing Peter. “So what now?”

“Now? I’d take you off this case if I could.”

“I-I wasn’t talking about the case.” Neal glanced down at his hands.

“What did Interpol promise you?” Peter asked. “What was so important that you’d throw our case?”

“She said she knew who was protecting Adler.” Neal took a breath. “How to draw him out.”

“In exchange for what?”

“She wanted me to throw the meet with Lao—Interpol wants his boss.”

Peter shook his head. “Lao doesn’t have a boss.” Peter walked toward Neal. “This—this is about jurisdiction. If they arrest him on Asian soil they get additional funding. Five-hundred thousand dollars. That’s the price of a dead FBI agent.”

Neal blinked.

“You think you can believe anything this woman tells you?”

“I-I’m sorry, Peter.” Neal glanced back down at his hands. “I just—every time I think about Adler still being out there I—” He took a breath. “If he was just behind bars or even if I knew where he was...” His voice cracked.

Peter sat down next to him and pulled him into a hug. “I know. I know you’ve been having nightmares. I know this is hard for you, but I promise you, cutting a backroom deal with Interpol isn’t going to get you closer to feeling free of Adler. We’re going to catch him, but we’re going to do it the right way. Okay?”

Neal managed to nod. “Okay.”

“Okay.” Peter let him go, taking hold of Neal’s chin and looking him in the eye. “I am going to spank you for lying to me, Neal.”

“Peter—”

“You aren’t going to talk your way out of this.” He shifted his grip and pulled Neal over his lap with what seemed like no effort at all.

Neal yelped in protest. “Peter, my suit!”

“It’ll be fine.” Peter contemplated trying to get Neal’s pants down and decided the fabric wasn’t going to be all that much of a barrier and started spanking.

The first time Peter had spanked Neal, there had been a certain—method, to it. This was different. Peter had been a bit hesitant the last time, but this time? Neal was a hundred percent certain that this was worse. Peter didn't keep to any set pattern, spanking fast and hard. Neal started to struggle after a minute and Peter took a tighter hold of him and swatted his thigh.

"You want to tell me why we're here?"

"No."

Peter raised his eyebrows at the sass and shifted Neal down a bit so he could get better access to the more sensitive sit spots, laying out eight hard swats. "Try that again, Neal."

The sub whimpered. "Because I lied to you." *Been lying to you.* As Peter continued the spanking, Neal couldn't help think about the other things he'd been lying to Peter about. He didn't feel guilty about the painting, giving it back to Julianna *had* been the right thing to do but...not going to therapy?

No. He definitely wasn't doing himself any favors. *Peter knows about the nightmares. Does he know I haven't been going to therapy?* He bit his lip, unwilling to start crying just yet. He took hold of a pillow and buried his face in it. Now that he was thinking about it, he was feeling guilty about it, but Peter wasn't spanking him for lying about therapy. He was spanking him for lying about Meilin.

Peter frowned, they'd gotten to the point in the spanking where Neal *ought* to be starting to let go, and he wasn't. He paused, running a hand through the dark curls. "Neal, something else you need to tell me, kiddo?"

Neal wanted to shake his head, but that would be a lie too. He whined a soft affirmative.

"Okay, buddy. What's wrong? Did you break a rule I don't know about?"

Neal swallowed. "Yes, Peter."

Peter sighed. "What rule did you break?"

"I—I haven't been going to therapy," he mumbled.

Peter raised his eyebrows. "And why didn't your doctor call me?"

Neal whined again.

Peter gave him a few swats to help him along.

"Because I made her think I had a new therapist."

"You lied to your therapist."

"Yes, Peter."

Peter sighed, running a hand over his face. “Okay. I’m not happy about it, but we’ll fix it. Tomorrow, we’re calling your therapist’s office and explaining what happened and then I will personally escort you to your appointments. Are we clear?”

Neal nodded. “Yes, Peter.”

“Okay.” Peter sighed again and shook his head before he helped Neal to his feet and reached for the fastening of his trousers.

“Peter!” Neal complained.

Peter gave him a sharp look. “Yes, Neal.” He pulled his pants down and pulled him back down over his lap and resumed the spanking. “You need this, and you know it.”

Neal wanted to argue, but he couldn’t. He’d practically told Peter to spank him. *Stupid submissive instincts*. He hated feeling guilty for lying. He hated feeling guilty for something he never would have felt guilty for before—before Peter.

“There will be no more lying, Neal,” Peter lectured. “I want to trust you, and that means you need to trust me.”

Neal yelped after a particularly sharp smack, “Yes, Peter!”

“You will go to therapy, Neal. That’s not optional. You need help working through what happened to you.”

Neal nodded, tears welling up.

“That’s it, buddy, let it go.” Peter slowed his pace, driving Neal toward emotional release with a patience Neal wasn’t really in a place to appreciate.

When the tight ball of guilt in his chest released in a flood of tears. “I’m sorry, Peter,” Neal said. “I’m sorry, please forgive me. Please—”

Awkward or not, Peter didn’t bother trying to stand Neal back up before getting him into his arms. Neal made a soft sound in surprise, finding himself upright so quickly.

“It’s okay now, I forgive you,” Peter soothed. “Good boy.” The rest of what he was saying sort of blurred for Neal, taking on a tone more than meaning.

Neal decided he could probably die a happy a man as long as Peter kept petting his hair. It was the best feeling in the world. *He forgave me again*. Neal’s tears stopped, and he started humming softly, burrowing closer to Peter.

Peter couldn’t help his smile. When Neal was like this, it was easy to forget he was a world-class thief, art forger and con man.

He could be a great agent, Peter thought. Where would he be now if Adler hadn't gotten to him? How did he end up with Adler in the first place?

Peter glanced up from Neal when Elizabeth came back, shooting her a smile. She smiled back and settled down next to Peter, placing a hand on Neal's leg.

Neal shifted, looking over at Elizabeth and managing a smile. "Hey."

"Hey, sweetie. You feel better?"

He nodded.

"You want some water?"

"Please?"

"Okay." Elizabeth's crinkled when she smiled. "I'll be right back."

Neal sighed and glanced up at Peter. "We're going to catch Lao, Peter. I know it."

Peter nodded. "Yeah, we will."

Elizabeth came back with Neal's water. "Here you go, sweetie."

"Thanks, Elizabeth." Neal took the glass with a smile, straightening.

"You're welcome."

For the briefest of moments, Neal was reminded of the early days of being with Kate. When Adler was still kind to him and Kate would help settle him. *This is different though.* It was different. It felt different. *The difference is, Peter and Elizabeth actually care about me.*

And that, was just a little bit terrifying.

Neal couldn't help doing as Meilin asked when the meet came, but he wasn't about to screw Peter over either. He just, found another way to get the FBI what they needed to arrest Lao. Good thing to, as Meilin gave him an empty flash drive. He handed it over to Peter as a peace offering. The next day though, Meilin called him when he got to work.

"Calling to apologize about the empty flash drive?"

"That was a precaution, I had to be careful with information this sensitive."

"You know who's helping Adler stay off the grid?"

"I don't know his name—but I do know this." She paused. "He's FBI."

Neal slumped down at his desk, listening to the dial tone for a moment before slipping the phone into his pocket.

Someone in the FBI is hiding Adler. Working for Adler.

Fuck.

Chapter End Notes

Dun dun dun...

You can see I'm cleaving close to cannon here, but we'll be getting more divergent as we go. I did have to changed the alias Neal used here, because I burned his Halden alias in chapter one.

As far as I know Whisper91 is the first person to use HomoDynamic as a term in a BDSM AU fic--Specifically the Kingsman Fic Fallout *which is awesome and you should all go read it*. I asked her if I could use it and she graciously agreed.

Free Fall

Chapter Summary

Contains spoilers for the episode Free Fall.

Spankings mentioned.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“So...” Mozzie eyed Neal with no small amount of concern. “Alder is being hidden by someone working for the FBI. That’s—not good.”

“That’s putting it mildly, Moz.”

Neal had managed to convince Peter to let him off his leash for a walk with Mozzie before work today.

“Now you understand my fear of the man,” Mozzie said. “Do you have any suspects?”

“How many field offices does the FBI have?”

“Fifty-six, not including resident agencies.”

“Then I have a lot of suspects.” Neal sighed. His phone rang and he put a hand up to silence Mozzie. “Hey Peter.”

“Neal, you still with Mozzie?”

“Yes.” Neal glanced at his friend. “What’s up?”

“I need you to meet me at one east 70th Street in thirty minutes.”

“The Frick Collection? I’m intrigued.”

“Apparently they’re missing a Degas.” Peter sighed. “I’ll see you there.”

Neal hung up and shook his head.

“So what do you want me to do?” Mozzie asked.

“Nothing. Yet.”

Neal eyed the empty spot on the wall. “They took the frame. Huh.”

“You find the missing *frame* to be the thing to focus on?” Peter asked.

“Well, yeah. Most thieves don’t bother with the frame. It’s bulky. Hard to carry out. It’s a lot easier to slice the painting out of the frame, roll it up and go.”

“Fair enough.”

Neal frowned. “Degas’ *The Rehearsal*, it last sold for 165,000 francs in 1914, it’s worth considerably more now. Degas has been popular.”

A commotion on the other side of the gallery drew Neal and Peter’s attention. The curator rushed into the room, followed by another employee holding a heavy gold framed painting—Neal frowned.

“It seems the thief left the painting!” the curator said. “Look.”

Neal frowned. “May I take a look?”

“Who are you?”

“Neal Caffrey. May I take a look at the painting? Just to confirm its authenticity, of course.”

The curator frowned. “I can assure you—”

“The FBI will need to confirm its authenticity,” Peter interrupted. “Let my consultant do his job Mr. Patterson.”

“We’ll have to go to the back,” he said at last.

“Of course,” Neal agreed. “

They set the painting down on a table in one of the back rooms and Neal set about looking it over with a magnifying light. Peter watched him closely, noting the furrow in Neal’s brow as the kid concentrated.

Neal blinked and straightened. “This—is a forgery.”

“That’s—it’s still in the *frame*,” the curator protested.

“I can’t speak for the frame but the painting...is a forgery. The craquelure is too immature for a painting that’s supposed to be a hundred years old. And the signature is a little off.” Neal gave the curator a sharp look. “Any expert would notice that *without* a magnifying glass.”

The man flushed.

Peter rolled his eyes. “We’ll have to take it back to the FBI for further analysis Mr. Patterson.”

Patterson groaned.

“We’re going to need all of the surveillance video and a list of all the employees who would have access afterhours.”

“Surely you don’t think an employee did this?” Patterson exclaimed.

“We can’t rule anything out.”

Patterson groaned again, and Neal smiled.

They got back to the office a bit later. Hughes was in the conference room with an unfamiliar man, and a second stranger stood on the landing. Jones met them near Neal’s desk.

“OPR is here,” he said.

“OPR?” Neal asked.

“Office of Professional Responsibility,” Peter explained. “The police have Internal Affairs, we have OPR.”

“The guy with Hughes is Agent Garrett Fowler,” Jones said. “I don’t know why he’s here, but Hughes doesn’t look happy about it and Fowler’s little friend over there has been watching everyone. I don’t like him.” Jones glanced at Peter. “Hughes wants you up there.”

Peter sighed. “Okay. Neal, I’d stay out of OPR’s way if I were you.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” Neal watched Peter walk off and turned to Jones. “So…Why is OPR here?”

Jones shrugged. “Not sure. Could have something to do with that Degas but…”

Neal frowned. “Weird.”

The other OPR agent walked toward them, eyeing Caffrey. “So you’re Neal Caffrey, huh?”

“That’s what it says on my driver’s license,” Neal replied with a smile.

“I’m surprised Burke doesn’t have you on a leash.”

Neal flinched slightly and opened his mouth but Jones stepped between him and the OPR agent with a feral smile fixed on his face. “I’m surprised Fowler doesn’t keep you gagged.”

The man frowned.

“You should walk away now,” Jones continued, “before I have to show you how to behave.”

Neal watched the agent walk away, somewhat in awe. He wasn’t even sure Jones *liked* him. Jones turned back to Neal and smiled.

“Uh—thanks for that,” Neal said.

“No problem. I hate it when Doms think they can get away with saying anything they like.” Jones tugged on his shirt sleeve, exposing a stainless steel cuff. “We have to stick together.”

Neal smiled. “I didn’t realize you were a sub.”

“The FBI can be a little old-school sometimes, so I keep it to myself, mostly.” Jones put a hand on Neal’s shoulder. “Subs aren’t the only ones who can Drop, I’m no more liability to the team than a Dom. I just have to give some people a reminder now and again.”

“You are much sneakier than I gave you credit for Jones.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment.”

Peter came back down a few minutes later. “Neal, why don’t we get lunch?”

Neal frowned, but nodded, sending Jones a quick look. The other man shrugged.

Something though, was definitely, *up*.

“So...” Neal glanced at Peter as they walked down to the deli. “What did OPR want? Is it about our case?”

Peter sighed. “Yes and no.”

“Okay. Do they have suspects or something they want us to look at?”

“Sort of.” Peter paused. “Fowler was—unhappy.” He looked at Neal. “Because you were with me last night, I could provide an alibi.”

Neal swallowed. “They think I stole it?”

“He seems keen to make it stick to you.” Peter shook his head.

“Well I didn’t do it.” Neal shrugged. “I was with you and Elizabeth. Besides, I’ve never forged a Degas.”

“That’s good to hear,” Peter said. “Really.”

Neal flashed a smile.

“We have to stay on our toes, whatever OPR is after—I don’t want you getting caught in the middle.”

Neal nodded. He was going to have to tell Mozzie to add this Fowler guy to their list of suspects, just in case. “Come on Peter, I’m starving.” He picked up the pace.

Peter shook his head and hurried after.

Neal came up with a short list of possibly suspects for Peter until it was time to leave, heading up to his office with the file.

“You got names for me?” Peter asked.

“I do.” Neal handed him the file.

Peter flipped through a moment. “Well this guy’s dead.”

Neal made a face. “At least that mean’s our list is shorter.”

“Uh huh.” Peter continued to go through it and nodded. “Good work though, these are solid possibilities.”

“Thank you.”

“Okay, let’s get home, Elizabeth promised pie if I didn’t stay late tonight.”

“Then let’s not keep her waiting.”

The next morning Neal and Hughes sat down in the conference room to go over his list of potential suspects. Neal seemed happy to be the center of someone’s attention. He usually was though.

Peter spotted Fowler coming into the office with his agents and walked out of his office to intercept him.

“Fowler.”

“Burke.” Fowler held up a file. “Your pet conman may not have stolen that painting, but he sure as hell forged it.”

Peter frowned, taking the file and opening it.

“He *signed it*.”

Peter eyed Fowler’s smug face, pretty sure he could punch him in the nose at least twice before anyone stopped him and swallowed. “You expect me to believe this?” He looked at the macro shot of the delicate *NC* located in one of the dancer’s hair. “He has a rock-solid alibi for the heist, so you come after him for forgery?” He handed the file back.

“I’m arresting him—and there’s nothing you can do to stop me.” Fowler’s smug face got, somehow, smugger.

Peter took a deep breath. “No—Neal is my responsibility. If he did this, I’ll put the cuffs on him.” He couldn’t even consider letting Fowler do that. He wasn’t sure how Neal would react to someone other than him putting him in restraints. He doubted Fowler would be gentle. Peter led the way into the conference room.

“Neal Caffrey, you’re under arrest,” Fowler said, dropping the file onto the table. “For forgery.”

Neal frowned. “I did *not* forge that Degas.” He looked at Peter. “You don’t believe this, do you?”

“Doesn’t matter, he’s got a warrant.” Peter took Neal by the wrist, pulling him to his feet. “You have the right to remain silent.”

“I didn’t do this.” Neal’s eyes went wide as Peter carefully put the cuffs on.

“Don’t slip these,” Peter ordered gently, collecting his suit coat from the chair and draping it over the cuffs. “We’ll figure this out, okay?”

Neal managed to nod.

This is so not good.

Neal ended up back in the same detention center, which was where Peter visited him the very next day.

“I’m doing everything I can, but every time I turn around Fowler has a new piece of evidence. It’s mostly circumstantial but he’s building this case.” Peter shook his head.

“Why would Fowler *want* me in prison?” Neal frowned. “This seems like a lot of effort to go through.”

Peter shrugged. “I don’t know.”

Neal licked his lips. *I should tell him what Meilin said.* But he couldn’t risk doing it in the prison. There were too many risks that someone would overhear.

A few minutes later, one of the guards came into the room. “Agent Burke, his lawyer is here.”

Peter glanced at Neal, raising an eyebrow.

Mozzie came in a few seconds later with briefcase in hand, wearing a very snazzy red bow tie.

“He’s a lawyer?” Peter pointed at the man in disbelief.

“You can check my University of Phoenix Online degree.” Mozzie paused. “Go Cardinals.”

Peter sighed. “I really hope you know what you’re doing, Mozzie. Neal, be good. I’m going to do everything I can to get you out of here.”

“Thanks, Peter.”

Once Peter was gone, Mozzie opened up his briefcase, pulling out a bag of shredded paper. “The judge actually raised his voice to the prosecutor. *Open discovery*, turn over every file they have on Caffrey. They’re sending a truck!” Mozzie grinned.

“I take it you followed Fowler?” Neal nodded at the shredded documents.

“I did. He shredded these.”

Neal smiled. “And you got information on the judge?”

“I did.” Mozzie pulled out a file and passed it over.

Neal took a few minutes to look it over and glanced back up at Mozzie. “I need you to liquidate some assets...we need to buy a bakery.” *Can’t leave all the heavy lifting to Peter after all, can I?*

Mozzie smiled.

Neal went over his checklist with Mozzie before they headed to court, everything was in place. Neal had always enjoyed chess, but this particular venture was a bit more like Mouse Trap—well, a reverse mouse trap.

This should be fun.

Cruz stopped Peter outside the courthouse. “The arraignment’s been moved to the judge’s chambers across the street. Apparently, Caffrey is going to confess.”

Peter frowned, glancing at Elizabeth. “Caffrey never confesses.”

Cruz shrugged. “Want me to tell Hughes?”

“Yeah. I’ll head over there.”

Elizabeth followed Peter across the street, somewhat curious.

Peter frowned, pausing. “A bakery.”

“The Greatest Cake,” Elizabeth read. “Didn’t you say Neal bought a bakery?”

“Yeah.” He made a face. “Yeah I did.”

“Wait—Peter look.” Elizabeth pointed toward the windows above the bakery, where Neal was currently clinging.

Peter raised his eyebrows. “I’m gonna kill him.”

Neal jumped, landing back first into the reinforced awning, rolling down and swinging onto the ground. He spotted Peter and Elizabeth, shrugging broadly before taking off to a van across the street. It sped away the minute the van door closed.

“Did I really just see that?” Elizabeth asked.

“Yup.” Peter shook his head. “When I get my hands on him...” He exhaled sharply. “You should go, before this place gets crazy.”

Elizabeth nodded. “Okay, hon. Be careful.”

“I will.” He kissed her gently and pulled out his phone. This was *definitely* not how he’d foreseen this day going.

By the time Peter got home he was praying Neal had left the country, because if he hadn’t, he was pretty sure he was going to murder him. Elizabeth was standing in the dining room when he came into the house.

“Fowler actually has people stationed outside our house.”

“Yeah, I saw,” Elizabeth replied awkwardly.

Peter shook his head. “As if he’d be careless enough to come here.” He turned from the window, glancing at Elizabeth before noticing the out of place chair at the dining table. Neal’s chair. He glanced back at Elizabeth. She was—twitchy. He glanced at the kitchen door and then back at Elizabeth, propping his hands on his hips. “Where do you think he did go, El?”

She made a face, biting her lip and shrugging, eyes wide.

“Is he in the kitchen?”

She made a face and then nodded.

Peter sighed. “Neal!” he whispered.

The kitchen door squeaked open, Neal peeking out. “Peter—”

Peter beckoned him over, even more irritated than he had been before. Neal hurried to the partition wall, plastering himself against it and out of sight of the windows.

“Of all the places you could run you called my wife?”

“You say that like it’s a bad thing,” Neal returned.

“You helped him sneak in?” Peter looked at Elizabeth sharply.

She straightened. “Well I wouldn’t have had to help him sneak in if there weren’t people watching our house,” she rationalized.

Peter stalked forward. “You *lied* to the FBI.”

Elizabeth shook her head. “Honey, I did *not lie* to the FBI. There was just lots of milk and cookies and pleasant, *distracting* conversation while Neal slipped around the back.”

Neal nodded supportively.

“I love this, you turned my wife into an accomplice.”

“Give me one minute to explain.”

“One minute, to explain what you were thinking when you did a free fall from the judge’s chambers.” Peter frowned. “And then you are *both* getting spanked.”

Elizabeth winced. “Should I just...”

“Corner,” Peter confirmed, giving her a kiss on the cheek as she headed off upstairs. “Start talking, Neal.”

“Remember how Mozzie got the judge to hand over my files? Well, it turns out Fowler shredded some of them. I’ve spent the last few days putting them back together.” He pulled the papers free from his pocket and handed them over. “Look.”

“I made this call from here. They tapped my phone.”

Neal shook his head. “They didn’t tap it, that would have required a court order. Take a look at your phone. It’s been bugged.”

Peter took a look, shaking his head. “They’ve been inside my house.” He paced. “There’s no way they had time to get a court order.”

“Exactly. Fowler is dirty.” Neal swallowed. “I think he’s using you to get to me.”

“Why?”

“Meilin called me after the case was over—she told me that Adler was being helped by someone in the FBI. What if that someone is Fowler?”

Peter sighed. “*If* that is true...we still have to clear your name.”

“I’ve been working on that too,” Neal replied, pulling another paper from his pocket. “Jean Renard, forger and thief. He’s on my list of suspects *and* word is he’s trying to fence a Degas. Luckily for us, he’s got an ego. He’s not going to let someone else take credit for his work.”

Peter took the paper and looked it over. “Okay. So we catch Renard, clear your name and then what?”

“Investigate OPR?”

Peter snorted. “Yeah, because that’s not career suicide.”

“He’s already investigating you.”

“One thing at a time, Neal.” Peter rubbed his face. “For instance, right now, you can head down to the basement and stand in the corner.”

“Can’t this wait?” Neal pleaded.

“No.” Peter gave him a firm look, pulled him away from the wall and smacked his behind sharply. “Get going. I’ll deal with you once I’ve handled Elizabeth.”

“I asked her for help, Peter, you—”

“She manipulated the FBI,” Peter replied. “Downstairs, now, or you can get two spankings instead of one.”

Neal shook his head and hurried off downstairs.

Peter sighed. *Two of them. I have two of them.*

He spent a good half hour with Elizabeth, mostly comforting her after the spanking. Elizabeth didn’t really hold on to guilt but she always needed a good long cuddle. After, when he went downstairs to deal with Neal, Elizabeth couldn’t *quite* help standing at the basement door and listening in.

“What the hell were you thinking jumping out that window? You could have been killed!”

“Now, Peter, I did actually have the awning made to hold my weight for the fall, I wouldn’t have jumped onto a *regular* awning.”

“Uh huh, and what if you’d missed?”

“Please, as if I—” Neal’s rebuttal was cut off by the all-to-familiar sound of flesh striking fabric covered flesh. “Ow!”

“You are not invincible, young man. You could have gotten yourself killed today!”

Elizabeth grimaced as she heard the tell-tale sounds of a Peter Burke spanking well under way, her own tender posterior twinging in sympathy. There wasn’t really anything she could do for Neal right then, though, so she headed into the kitchen to get the rest of those cookies and some water. She had a feeling her partner in crime was going to need both by the time Peter was done with him.

And she was rarely wrong.

Neal was right about Jean Renard, the forger/thief *did* have the original Degas in his position when they raided his New York apartment and more importantly, he admitted in front of a half-dozen FBI agents that he had done the forgery, with a great deal of scoffing about even the possibility that someone else could have done such fine work.

Things were smoothed over with the DOJ, Neal was grounded for another two weeks and Fowler was left looking like an idiot which, at the very least, made Neal happy.

He even got some applause when he walked back into the office on Monday, flashing a bright smile and settling in at his desk for a day of mortgage fraud cases—not really a surprise. As he sorted through the mess OPR had made of his desk he came across a sealed manila envelope. He frowned, flipping the envelope over.

Neal George Bennett

Neal's mouth opened in surprise. He tore the envelope open and pulled out the slip of paper inside. There was a message written over a slightly blurry photograph.

You've only delayed the inevitable Neal. You have something I want.

Give me the music box and I'll let you go.

Fail me and she dies.

It had been years since he last saw Ellen, but she didn't look all that different. He took a deep breath and then another, but he couldn't stop his hands from shaking. He couldn't stop his heart beat racing. He knew that hand writing. *Adler's watching me.*

He felt like he'd been punched in the gut and it was getting harder to breathe.

Jones noticed Neal's wide eyes and pale face and immediately got up and headed for Peter's office.

"What's—"

"Neal looks like he's having a panic attack."

Peter frowned, getting up from his desk to get a look at the kid and then immediately heading down, "I'm taking him to the quiet rooms, if Hughes asked we had a Dynamic emergency."

"Got it, boss."

Peter headed straight for Neal's desk, putting a hand on the kid's shoulder. "Neal?"

Neal looked up, panic written across his face. "Peter."

"Hey, buddy, let's go someplace quiet? Okay?"

Neal looked down at the photo and back to Peter. “Okay.”

Peter read the message and frowned, turning to Jones, “Bag the photo and the envelope. Looks like Adler’s reaching out.”

“Yes, Sir.”

Peter had to pry Neal’s fingers off the paper first before he gently helped Neal to his feet and lead him down the hall to the floor’s quiet rooms, swiping his ID to gain entrance and getting Neal inside the nearest one before he had a complete breakdown.

Neal was trembling, sweating. Peter eyed his submissive ward carefully, trying to decide how to proceed next. After a moment’s consideration he helped Neal out of his suit jacket, tie and shoes before pulling the man into his arms and trying to soothe him.

After a few minutes, Peter was certain Neal was going to need to go down. “Hey, brat,” Peter said gently. “I think you need to go down. I’m going to put you on your knees, okay?”

Neal managed to nod.

“Let’s get your belt and over shirt off, okay? I know how much you hate it when your shirts get wrinkled.”

A smile flickered on Neal’s lips.

Peter followed through, sliding Neal’s belt off and then taking off his shirt, folding everything up and setting them on one of the room’s tables and pulling out a kneeler pad. Neal didn’t put up any resistance as Peter gently urged him to kneel down.

Neal’s posture was—perfect. Peter couldn’t help but think of how Adler must have molded Neal. He hated to think that this perfect image had been formed by an abusive sadist. A few minutes later, Neal was trembling again.

“You having trouble focusing, buddy?”

Neal nodded, whimpering.

“It’s okay, I know you’re trying. I’m going to help you.” He picked up Neal’s tie and knelt down to tie it over Neal’s eyes. “Is that all right?”

Neal nodded.

“Talk to me, buddy.”

“Yes, this is okay.”

“Good boy.” Peter ran a hand through Neal’s hair. “Focus on being here. Let go.”

Peter pulled a chair close so he could sit but Neal and keep a hand in his hair, combing his fingers through the dark curls gently. Neal was *starting* to drift, muscles starting to loosen,

but even after a good half hour, Neal wasn't actually *down*. He started to fidget again. Peter sighed.

"Neal, you need to let go now," he ordered softly.

"*Trying*," Neal whined. After a moment, he bit his lip and held up hands. "Could you—I need *more*."

Peter understood almost immediately. "Okay." He tugged off his own tie. "Hands behind your back, wrists crossed."

Neal's silent compliance made Peter wonder where Neal's playfulness was within his submission, or if Adler had beaten it out of him. He hoped they'd find a way to bring it back out again. El was definitely a brat, her submission was beautiful, but it was something that had to be earned and even deep in Subspace, she could be playful and even just a bit naughty. It was one of the things he loved about her.

He thought Neal would be the same way, and maybe he would be—with time.

Peter bound Neal's hands with his tie, ensured it wasn't too tight and sat back down again, hand back in Neal's hair. Peter lost track of time then, focused completely on Neal.

Neal couldn't remember the last time he'd felt so at ease, so secure. Peter's hand in his hair, the silk tie around his wrists—he felt grounded in the moment but at the same time, he was falling into that floating headspace he'd found so rarely these past few years.

When Neal finally found himself drifting back up, he pushed his head up a bit, nudging Peter's hand. He slipped out of the tie around his wrists with little effort, and reached for the blindfold.

"Hey there," Peter said. "Just can't help yourself, can you?"

Neal shrugged, smiling shyly. "Force of habit—slipping bonds, that is." He took a moment. "You're not mad, are you?"

"No." Peter smiled. "You're a good boy, *most* of the time."

Neal flushed.

"You went pretty far down, kiddo. You haven't done that with me." He kept playing with Neal's hair. "It's good to see you relaxing."

Neal hummed softly, leaning his head against Peter's leg. "I feel safe with you."

"You up for answering some questions?"

Neal swallowed. "You want to know who the woman in the photo was."

"I do. I also want to know why that envelope was addressed Neal Bennett. Which makes me wonder how much I really know about you." Peter gave him a look. "The kid with no

background before he turned eighteen. Wondering how you ended up in New York. Where you're from." Peter shrugged. "It's like you were a ghost who just appeared from thin air."

Neal shrugged. "Not much to tell, Peter. I ran away from home when I was sixteen. My dad is dead; my mom might as well be." Neal sat up a bit. "My aunt raised me. She always said I was too smart for my own good." Neal swallowed. "When I was a kid, I wanted to be a cop."

Peter raised his eyebrows. "Really? What changed?"

"I found out my dad wasn't the hero I thought he was." He chewed on his lip. "He was a dirty cop and—the reason there isn't any evidence of me before I turned eighteen is because of him."

Peter stayed quiet. Neal was trusting him with something big here.

"Me and my mom and Aunt Ellen—we were in WitSec. Mom got drunk one night and told me the whole story. I was angry—I felt betrayed. So I left, came to New York, met Mozzie," Neal laughed. "He was like the crazy uncle I never knew I wanted." He paused. "Caffrey is my mother's maiden name."

"So, what, you did cons with Mozzie?"

"Mozzie found out I had a knack for art." Neal made a face. "You know the rest."

"Most of it, yes." Peter was reeling a bit. He'd just been given a lot of new information. "Thank you for telling me, Neal."

Neal shrugged. "I know practically everything about you—seems fair you should know about me." He bit his lip. "I want you to trust me."

Peter smiled. "I do trust you."

"Most of the time," Neal added.

"We're getting there, brat, a day at time."

"Shouldn't we get back?" Neal stretched.

"I want you to drink some water first," Peter said. "Stay there, I'll get a bottle."

Neal smiled. "Yes, Peter."

"And we need talk about that music box."

Neal sighed. "Do we have to?"

"Yup." Peter came back with the water. "Drink that, and then we'll talk."

This—this is not going to be a fun conversation. "You might—have to arrest me. If I tell you."

Peter rolled his eyes. “I’d much rather get Adler.”

“Can I get that in writing?”

“Brat.”

Neal shrugged. “I can call my lawyer and he could draft something...”

“I will spank you.”

“Peter.”

“Drink your water.”

Neal grinned but did as he was told and Peter—Peter felt like he’d hit a milestone with Neal.

He was getting through to the kid. One day a time.

Chapter End Notes

Adler has made his first proper move...

Next up, Neal gets in over his head to help June's niece. No one is surprised.

Vital Signs

Chapter Summary

Contains Spoilers for the episode: Vital Signs.

There's fluff and things, which if any of you know me, means the next chapter will be a bit darker.

I am at least predictable.

Also, there's a spanking.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The next few cases went off with only minor criminal interference from Neal. While Neal had done some off-book investigating into Adler. He was out with June, watching her youngest granddaughter play soccer. He liked spending time with June. He liked not being grounded so he *could* spend time with June.

“She’s pretty good,” he said.

“Yes she is.” June smiled.

“And here she comes.”

Samantha ran up to them, a bright smile on her face. “Grandma June, did you see, did you see?”

“Yes I did, and you were *wonderful*,” June replied.

“I’m going to go again!” The girl bounced and hurried away.

“Go get ‘em!” Neal encouraged before turning back to June. “Samantha doesn’t look sick.”

“Not today.” She paused. “Samantha was taken off of the donors list—last week.” She sighed, shaking her head.

Neal frowned. “What can I do?”

June’s eyes widened slightly and she took his hand. “You are a good man, Neal.” She took a breath, and began to explain what had happened.

Neal popped over to the Peter and Elizabeth’s on Monday morning.

“Morning, Neal,” Elizabeth said.

“Good morning, Elizabeth.” Neal slipped into his chair and grabbed the cereal.

“Neal,” Peter gave him a suspicious look. “What brings you here this morning.”

“This says it has a free sheriff’s badge inside, did you get it already?” He dug into the box.

“Did you really come here for a plastic toy?” Peter asked.

Neal found the badge, grinning broadly before he sobered. “I’m here because of June.”

“What’s wrong with June?” Elizabeth asked.

“Her granddaughter needs a kidney, and she was bumped from the transplant list last week.”

“Why?” Peter asked.

“I don’t know, but a few days ago a woman approached June and told her that her organization could help source kidney for Samantha.”

“A lot of charities do that.”

“Yeah, but this one asked for a hundred-thousand-dollar donation.”

Peter raised his eyebrows. “A hundred grand? Look at you, bringing me a case.” Peter smiled.

Neal smiled, attaching the badge to his front pocket. “It’s what us lawmen do.”

Peter laughed. “Okay, I’m interested. Talk to June, get me specifics.”

“So I can run with it?”

“No, Barney Fife, you can *walk* very slowly.” He shook his head.

Neal grinned and stood up to leave.

“And Neal?”

“Yeah?”

“Remember, that’s not real.” He nodded at the badge.

Neal laughed. *Anything is real as long you’re confident enough.* He nodded and headed out.

“Run with it?” Mozzie repeated, eyeing Neal as he fussed with his tie. “Those were his exact words?”

“More or less,” Neal returned.

“I’m assuming less.” Mozzie gave his overly excitable friend a sharp look.

“He told me to get specifics, and I can’t get those until I meet the charity’s representative. Which is why I set up a meeting as June’s financial advisor.”

“Who’s the representative?”

“Melissa Calloway, the charity is called *Hearts Wide Open*.” Neal headed into the living area, turning on the TV to eye his surveillance camera feeds.

“That is truly menacing.” Mozzie followed him. “If I made a horror movie, I would definitely call it, *Hearts Wide Open*.” Mozzie glanced at the feed.

“Right no time,” Neal remarked, eyeing the car that had just pulled up.

“Already I don’t trust her.” Mozzie made a face. “A New Yorker that doesn’t take the subway is not a New Yorker you can trust.”

“I don’t take the subway,” Neal replied.

“Case and point.”

Neal shrugged. “She left her briefcase in her car.” He turned to Mozzie. “I need a favor—break into her car.”

“That’s not so much a favor as it is a truly terrible idea.” Mozzie shook his head. “There is a reason most crimes are committed at night—*no one can see you*.”

Neal sighed. “Fine. I’ll do it.”

“Then who’s going to meet Ms. Calloway.”

“You are.”

Mozzie gave him a look.

“It’s for *June*,” Neal pleaded.

Mozzie sighed. “I’ll need a tie.”

Neal grinned. “Just do what I do.” He hurried over to the bed, grabbing a tie he’d nixed for his own ensemble and handing it over. “You’ll do fine.”

“*Just do what I do*,” Mozzie repeated mockingly. “Right.”

Still riding a bit high on adrenaline from conning two cops *and* getting away from the car before Ms. Calloway got back, Neal conferred with Mozzie and then headed into the office to

brief Peter.

“I looked into *Hearts Wide Open*,” Peter said, handing Neal the file. “Melissa Calloway works for the charity’s founder, Dr. Wayne Powell. He runs a number of high end medical clinics across the east coast. Seems like a respectable guy.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure,” Neal said. “I talked to Melissa.” Peter shot him a look. “I got some names.”

“Are they admissible?”

Neal shrugged and made a face. “Uh—no.”

Peter sighed. “Let me tell you a story.”

“That’s *really* not necessary,” Neal shook his head.

“I had a CI once, local kid, named Jimmy Burger. Raised some money and opened a restaurant on Fifth.”

“Let me guess, he called it *Jimmy’s Burgers*.”

“No.”

“Burger Joint?”

“You done?”

Neal made a face, nodded and focused his attention on Peter’s tie.

“In order to stay in business, he had to do the mob some favors. But Jimmy didn’t like that. So he came to us for help. He even helped us make some cases. But then Jimmy got cocky. Started sticking his nose where it didn’t belong. You know what happened?” Peter gave him a long look.

“It didn’t end happily ever after?”

“No, he took one,” Peter put his index finger on the center of Neal’s forehead. “Right there.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

“Because Jimmy Burger is an example of what happens when you try to run the show on your own—don’t.”

Jones walked up to them. “Hey Neal, here’s the info on those names you asked me to check out.” He handed Neal the file and headed off.

Peter shot Neal a look. “What?” Neal protested. “I hadn’t heard your story yet.” He opened the file and showed it to Peter.

“There all members of Doctoral Global Initiative,” Neal remarked. “Maybe this is how he’s finding organs.”

“Interesting, using the third world as your own organ bank. Still, it’s too circumstantial to make a case. Let’s talk to Powell.”

“And I know where to find him,” Neal grinned.

Peter shot him a look and then swatted him once across the seat of his pants.

Neal sobered.

Peter shook his head. *This kid is going to get himself killed.*

Neal was pretty damn sure he was going to be dining out on Peter’s flirting technique for at least a few weeks. He filed the awkwardness away for later and approached his target at the bar after Peter had lured Melissa away.

“Scotch on the rocks,” Neal ordered. “Actually, hold the rocks. I just got off a thirty-hour flight, I’d like to forget it as soon as possible.”

“There’s a trick to that you know,” Powell said. “Sleeping pills.”

“I’ve tried that,” Neal replied. “I’m always too wound up.”

“The trick is, take them in the car on the way to the airport.”

“Thanks for the advice, Doctor—”

“Powell.”

“Wayne Powell? Wow. May I say, you are one of my heroes. Dr. Leonard Parker, DGI.” Neal held out his hand.

Powell took it, shaking firmly. “DGI? Well, then let me say that you are one of *my* heroes. Doctoral Global Initiative is one of the few charities I still respect.”

“Is that why you founded *Hearts Wide Open*?”

“One of the reasons.”

Neal continued to sweet talk Dr. Powell and left the conversation with a card and a promise to call the next time “Dr. Parker” was in India.

Which left him in a position to see Peter emerge from the medical tent with Melissa who was putting her jacket *back* on. Neal raised his eyebrows at Peter. The man flushed and shrugged awkwardly.

Definitely filing this away for later.

Neal got home that night to find Mozzie at the chess board looking—glum.

“Burn versus Bobby Fisher, 1956.” He pointed at the board after recognizing the game.

“Very good. Who won?”

“Fisher, he sacrificed his queen on move seventeen.” Neal frowned. “You okay?”

“The charity rescinded their offer.”

Neal took a seat. “What? Did they say why?”

“They said they found a more *pressing* recipient.” Mozzie fiddled with a knight absently.

“And you?”

“Yes, I scouted the clinic. Somethings got them spooked. Employees have been throwing files into the garbage all day.”

“You get a look at the files?”

“It’s pretty up scale. I couldn’t get too close. You have idea what’s go them so rattled?”

Neal frowned. *Peter must have done something.*

Meanwhile, at the Burke residence, Elizabeth was sorting through laundry and came across Melissa’s business card. “Honey?” she called.

“Yeah?” Peter hurried down the stairs and into the living room.

“What is this?” She held up the card.

“I was going to talk to you about that...” he sat down on the coffee table. “That is part of an undercover job I was working. Part of the cover was that I had to talk to another woman.”

“Must have been quite the conversation,” she turned the card over to see the phone number.

“I had to flirt with her, so Neal could get closer to the target.”

“Isn’t it usually the other way around?”

“She was a submissive.”

“You had to seduce another woman?” Her eyes went wide.

“I just had drinks with her. Nothing happened. I swear.”

Elizabeth pressed the card to her lips, a smile curling the corners of her lips as she tried not to laugh.

“Are you—are you laughing?”

“You had to *flirt*? You hate flirting.” She laughed.

“Yeah, and now I remember why.”

Giggling she asked, “What did you say to her?”

“I told her she looked thirsty.”

Self-control left Elizabeth at that point and she started laughing in earnest. “Please tell me there’s surveillance footage of this. I’ve got to see this.”

His phone rang in his pocket and he got up, heading away from his hysterical wife to pick up. “Yeah?”

“Hey it’s me. I was just wondering if you’d looked into that clinic yet,” Neal replied.

“Yeah, I put in a request for their financials. Why?”

“I’m just checking. Thanks.” There was a pause. “Why is Elizabeth laughing?”

“No idea.” Peter hung up, glancing at Elizabeth who was on the stairs. “You are in *so* much trouble, young lady,” he teased.

She raised her eyebrows, lips twitching. “Oh yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“I think you’ll have to catch me first Mr. Big-Bad-FBI.” She narrowed her eyes. “If you *can*.”

“Oh, I’ll take that challenge.”

She let out another peal of laughter, running up the stairs as Peter took off after her.

Neal’s plan was bold, a bit reckless, but he had Mozzie backing him so he was pretty sure everything would be fine. Well, until he heard the PA announce that security was being paged to Dr. Powell’s office—where he currently was. He hurried to send a fax, praying Peter would get it, when two security guards hurried in. They grabbed Neal, stopping the fax.

“*Don’t* move,” the brawny Dom ordered sharply.

Neal frowned. *Not good. Definitely not good.*

“He’s got some kind of tracker on his ankle,” the other security guy noted.

“Let’s get him restrained and then I’ll call Dr. Powell.”

Really, not good.

Peter couldn’t believe he was actually conning his way into the clinic, but he didn’t really have another option. He stalked down the hall, a warbling rendition of *High on Windy Hill*, signaling Neal’s location.

He slipped into the office, spotting his friend on a stretcher, restrained, *singing*.

“Hey, buddy!” Neal grinned.

“Neal.”

“Hi.”

Peter hurried over to him, taking a look at Neal’s eyes and hushing him when he started singing again. “We’ve got to get you out of the restraints.”

“Oh these.” Neal lifted up his arms. “I’ve never met a lock I couldn’t pick—except my anklet.”

“All right, come on.” Peter pulled Neal’s arm over his shoulders and helped him sit up.

“You’re strong—I got, I got it.”

Peter watched Neal fall face first on the floor and sighed. *I’m going to kill him*. He helped him back to his feet and helped down the hall and into a conference room to think about how to get the kid out of there. He sat him down against a wall and crouched down next to him.

“Why would you do something like this?”

“Dude, I’ve done *way* worse things than this.”

“Shut-up.” Peter paused, reconsidering the situation. “Like what?”

“You remember the Antioch manuscripts?” Neal grinned.

“You took those? How?” Peter asked in disbelief.

“Carrier pigeons,” he tapped his head. “Think about it.”

Peter sighed.

“Who cares? That’s not what’s important. It’s not about money—it’s about people.”

“Good. Because you’re going to spending a lot of quality time with people in orange jump suits when we get out of here.”

“Right. I’m going down once they see those security tapes of me breaking in here.” Neal paused, sobering somewhat. “You should know this... out of all the people in my life—you’re the only one.”

“The only one what?” Peter asked.

Neal swallowed. “The only person in my life I completely trust.”

Peter took a deep breath, running his fingers through Neal’s hair gently as he came to a decision. He stood up and grabbed a chair, cuffing Neal to it. “Don’t. Pick. This,” he ordered firmly before slipping out of the room.

Neal waited, fiddling with the cuff in daze. “I could slip you. That’s wouldn’t be picking, it would be slipping.”

Peter hurried back into the room, a small tape in his hand.

“What’s that?” Neal asked.

“The surveillance tape.”

“You stole that for me?” Neal’s soft surprised smile was possibly the most genuine smile Peter had ever seen on the sub’s face.

“Yeah, it’s a regular Kodak moment.” Peter pulled him to his feet. “I hope you know, young man, that once I get you home and these drugs wear off you have a date with my hand on your backside—and a hairbrush.”

Elizabeth helped Peter get Neal on the couch when he got them home, tucking a blanket around him and grabbing an icepack to help the headache—which was a combination of the drugs and hitting the floor face first.

“My head is killing me,” Neal muttered.

“Neal, are all right?” Elizabeth asked.

“Hey, what about me?” Peter asked.

Elizabeth’s expression turned from concerned to irritated in a flash as she looked at her Dom. “There are some dishes that need to be washed, Mr. Magic Hands.” She turned back to Neal, the concern returning. “Do you want some more ice?”

Neal nodded.

“I’ll get some.” She shot Peter another look, standing primly to head into the kitchen.

Neal was pretty sure he wanted to know what happened *there*, but was unwilling to let Peter know he was feeling better now—because once he *was* better he knew Peter would follow

through on his promise of a spanking. *He said hairbrush.* Neal *definitely* didn't want that.

Still, he did want to know how much of his fax had arrived. Clearly some of it had or Peter never would have shown up in time to rescue him. "You got my fax?" was his opening salvo. Short, pointed and limited in syllables.

"Yeah," Peter replied. "I did." Peter shook his head. "We'll talk about that later." He settled down on the coffee table. "Feeling better?"

Neal considered the answer to that question for a moment. If he said no, and Peter caught him in the lie, he had no doubt his coming spanking would be worse—and Peter would be disappointed in him. He didn't *want* Peter to be disappointed in him. Honestly, he knew he'd been a bit reckless going to the clinic but he hadn't been able to see another way. Samantha *needed* a kidney and he couldn't let Dr. Powell get away with his crimes.

He hadn't really thought it through.

"Neal?"

Neal shook his head slightly and turned to Peter. "Uh—yeah. I'm feeling better." He swallowed. "Are you going to spank me now?"

Peter raised his eyebrows and stood up, leaning down and helping Neal sit up before he hugged him tight. "You scared the hell out of me, brat."

Neal froze in momentary shock and then eased into the embrace. "M'sorry." He pressed his face into Peter's shoulder. "I panicked and I made a stupid plan. I'm sorry."

Peter pulled back a moment later, pressing a kiss to Neal's forehead. "Come on, buddy, let's go upstairs."

Neal whined softly but nodded. Peter straightened, helping Neal stand up.

Elizabeth walked into the living room with the ice bag, taking in the tableau. "Are you *sure* you're feeling better, Neal?" she asked.

Neal looked at her. "Yeah. Thanks for the ice though."

"You're welcome." She gave Peter an appraising look. "I'm going out for a bit, I'll pick up some of those pastries you like, Neal."

"Thanks."

Peter sighed and led Neal upstairs, briefly wondering how long his wife was going to be angry with him.

Until the next Ice Age, probably.

Peter took Neal to his room, depositing him in a corner for a moment while he grabbed the hairbrush from his bedroom and then rolled up his sleeves. He sat down, setting the brush

within arm's reach and taking a deep breath. He wasn't angry anymore, well he was, but not as angry as he had been. He knew better than to try and discipline any sub when he was boiling mad. It wouldn't be fair to them, and it wouldn't be fair to him either.

"Shoes off, pants down and then over my knee, kiddo."

Neal turned around, hair still mussed and eyes a bit red. He looked so damn young. He didn't argue though, getting his shoes off, walking over to the bed and unfastening his trousers before pushing them down to his knees and getting himself over Peter's lap. His legs hung out over the edge of the bed, head and chest resting on the bed. Peter casually grabbed a pillow and handed it to Neal without a word. Neal grabbed it, silently grateful to have something to hold onto.

"First off," Peter said, "I want you to know I'm proud of you for telling me the truth downstairs. I know that had to be hard, but the fact that you thought about what the right thing to do was, and then made the right choice? That's a big step, buddy." Peter rubbed his back gently. "You're being very good for me right now, but that doesn't change the fact that you put yourself in danger today. You broke the law." Peter took his boxers down and placed a hand on Neal's now bare posterior. "Those are big rules and this isn't the first time you've broken them, is it?"

"No, Peter."

"No. You're getting the last bit of your spanking with the hairbrush, understand?"

Neal swallowed. "Yes, Peter."

"But Neal, if you start to feel—if it's too much, I want you to know you can tell me. You say red and we'll stop. Okay? I want you to feel safe."

Neal took a moment to process that. He *did* feel safe with Peter and right that moment he felt a surge of warmth at Peter's assurances. "Okay, Peter."

"Good boy." Peter took a breath and started spanking.

Neal didn't have it in him to retain anything even resembling composure. He'd had an awful day, he felt terrible about upsetting Peter and more importantly there was a hairbrush with his name on it. As Peter had lectured, Neal's guilt reared its ugly head and like a terrible octopus, it clung to his insides with malicious intent.

If pain was all it took to wash the guilt away, Alder's method would have been effective, but Neal knew that wasn't it at all. The pain was only a part of it. The pain was a reminder that Peter was his Dom. Peter was in charge and Neal had done something *bad* but it was okay now because Peter was giving him this way of making up for it.

Neal *had* been reckless. He *had* broken the law. Broken Peter's rules. Put himself in danger. But Peter hadn't ignored that, or dismissed Neal or even raised his voice all that much. Peter was Neal's safety net, ready to catch him when he did something stupid.

Peter was, Neal realized, quickly becoming *family*.

So as the burning ache grew with every hard, resounding *smack*, the octopus slowly lost its grip and it didn't matter that Neal had his face buried in the pillow as he cried or that he was kicking and making a racket because Peter was telling him he could and that he was a good boy and he was taking his spanking so well.

Neal couldn't help but notice when there was a pause either as Peter picked up the hairbrush and he felt the warning tap with a cringe of uncertainty. *Alder never used a hairbrush*. Neal thought. *Cane. Belt. Never a hairbrush. Never this personal*. The first smack was *awful*, the wood coming down on his already sore bottom was *definitely* an unforgettable sensation but it wasn't *bad*, if that made sense. It didn't bring up bad memories or phantoms of the past. It was just a different kind of pain and Neal was very determined after a good half-dozen smacks that he *never* wanted to feel it again.

Of course, he did get to feel it again, for another half-dozen or so swats and then the octopus let go entirely and Neal was able to surrender into a slumped heap of tears and terribly embarrassing apologies he would never remember later but were so important in that moment.

"That's my good boy," Peter said, rubbing Neal's back. "All's forgiven now. Good boy."

Neal hiccupped, wiping tears away from his face. Peter pulled his boxers back up before helping him stand—*ouch*—and then step out of his pants before he was tugged down into the Dom's lap for a hug. *Yes*. Neal burrowed closer. As much as he loved the comfort and security of being in a Dom's arms, the feeling of warm forgiveness basking over him, he knew this was as intimate as he'd ever get with any Dominant.

He simply couldn't imagine a sexual component ever coming into play.

Once he'd come back up from his fuzzy headspace, Neal was surprised to find Elizabeth next to him and Peter. She smiled and handed him a water bottle. "Hey, sweetheart."

"Hey, Elizabeth." He took a long drink. "Thanks."

"No problem."

Neal chewed his lip a moment, "Peter?"

"Yes, brat?"

Neal flushed. "I—remember when I got touchy about you trying to set me up with that Domme from the gallery?"

"Yeah." Peter raised an eyebrow at him. "What about it?"

"I wasn't just touchy because I was grounded. I—I *don't* date Doms." He bit his lip. "At all. Adler wasn't—we weren't...I was *with* Kate."

“Ah.” Peter made a face in understand, glancing at Elizabeth and then back at Neal. “So she *really* wasn’t your type then.”

“Not even a little.” Neal smiled wryly.

“Okay. Well then, I guess I’ll just have to get used to the idea of having you around and when you find the submissive or neutral of your dreams, there’s no reason you can’t still be my ward.”

Neal took another drink of water, throat suddenly dry. Peter’s open acceptance was—well, as usual, Peter had surprised him. He *was* after all, a bit traditional. Although really, Neal should have known better. “Thanks, Peter.”

“You’re welcome, brat.”

“This is great, actually,” Elizabeth said. “I can set you up with some of my friends.”

Neal flashed a smile at her. “You sure that’s a good idea?”

She smiled back. “Oh, I think they can handle Neal Caffrey and if they *can’t*, at least I know someone who can.” She arched an eyebrow at Peter. “Even if I’m still mad at him.”

Peter sighed. *Ice age. Definitely the next Ice Age.*

A questionably legal con, some leg work and impressive acting—if Neal said so himself—later, and they had Dr. Powell right where they wanted him. After the arrest, the transplant board was so shocked at the scandal, they put June’s granddaughter back on the list in her previous position and Neal was left with the warm sensation of having done something *right*. Which was great, because he was going to spend the next two weeks working mortgage fraud cases.

In the end though, he was pretty sure it was worth it. At least until the eleventh paper cut.

Chapter End Notes

Next up, Fowler makes another move against Neal.

The Music Box

Chapter Summary

A family member surprises Neal at the office. Neal calls Alex in for help with the music box.

Ware: there be a spanking toward the end.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Neal had sort of forgotten—all right, he'd put it out of his mind—that Peter knew about the music box and Ellen and...well needless to say he really wasn't expecting to walk into work Wednesday and find his Aunt Ellen waiting for him at his desk. She hadn't been as gray when he last saw her, and he hadn't towered over her quite so much.

"Ellen?"

"Neal." She smiled widely. "Well, you *have* grown, haven't you?" She pulled him in for a hug before she grabbed him by the ear. "What the hell were you thinking running away from home, young man? I only found out you were even *alive* because your face was on television after you were arrested!"

Neal cringed. "Ellen," he whined. "That hurts."

"You know what else hurts, Neal? Thinking you were dead for the last decade!"

Neal winced. "Ellen..."

Peter cleared his throat. "As certain as I am that Neal deserves to be scolded," he started, "perhaps not here."

Ellen sighed but released Neal's ear. "Fair enough." She did, however, give Neal a good swat.

"Ow."

Peter grinned. "I'm Peter Burke, it's a pleasure to meet you."

"Ellen Parker." She made a face. "Well, it is these days anyhow."

Peter nodded in understanding. "Let's go up to my office and talk."

"Of course."

Peter led the group up to his office and closed the door. “I spoke to the US marshal on your detail. He filed you in on the situation?”

“He did.” Ellen took a seat. “A man named Vincent Adler threatened me in order to persuade Neal to hand over an item which may or may not be in his possession.”

“Just for the record,” Neal said, “that would be *not*.”

“Then why does Adler think you do?” Peter gave Neal a look.

“I sort of allowed people to think I’d stolen it,” Neal shrugged. “It gave me a superhuman air.”

“Uh huh.” Peter sighed. “Do you know where it is?”

“Not at the moment. I have a friend who *might* have an idea where it is,” Neal hedged.

“Which friend?” Peter raised his eyebrows.

“Alex.”

“Alex what?”

“Hunter.”

Peter sighed. “Is this Alex Hunter the fence?”

“Maybe.”

“So...how many crimes have you committed since you ran away from home?” Ellen asked.

Neal made a face. “I can’t actually answer that question without my lawyer present to ensure all of the statute of limitations are up.”

Peter sighed.

“At least you good at being a thief. I mean, you were always a very smooth young man—you know he once forged a bus pass. He was eight.” The latter remark was directed to Peter.

“I was tired of getting to school late,” Neal protested.

“He hustled pool from the time he was ten and I’m *almost* positive he forged his mother’s signature on every school report.”

Neal made a face. “Well, yeah, but only because she was—absent. Anyway. Peter, I’ll have to talk to Alex if we’re going to get this music box. I get it and then we can use it to draw Adler into the open.”

“You mean you steal if from whoever has it now.”

“When you put it that way you make it sound like a bad idea.” Neal pouted. “Come on, wrong thing, right reason.”

Peter sighed. “I’ll allow a meeting with Alex—but there will be no shenanigans.”

“Of course not.”

“Also, El wants Ellen to come over for dinner tonight.”

“I’d be delighted.”

“Great.”

Neal glanced at the two Doms. “Why do I feel like dinner is just going to be one long discussion of my childhood?”

Ellen reached over to pat him on the cheek. “Because you’re a smart boy.”

I am so screwed.

Alex Hunter was a slight brunette with large brown eyes and a disdainful look on her face. She looked Neal up and down, propping a hand up on her hip. “Neal Caffrey.” She raised her eyebrows. “What do you want?” She’d agreed to meet at his apartment.

“I heard you were back in town.” He smiled brightly.

“I heard you got pinched by the Feds.” She glanced down at his ankle. “That they have you on a leash.”

Neal made a face and shrugged. “Kate set me up, Alex.”

“I heard that too.” Alex closed her eyes for a moment before looking back at Neal. “I heard about what Adler was doing to you.”

“Alex—”

“No. Neal, I should have known. I should have seen the signs.” She shook her head. “I *know* what submissive abuse can look like. I should have seen the signs.”

“It’s not your fault.”

She bit her lip and shook her head again. “Still. I’m sorry. You went through hell with Adler.”

“I’m still going through hell, but I think I’m getting closer to an exit.” He pulled out a chair and sat down. “I know it looks like I’m on a leash, Alex but—for the first time in a long time I feel, *free*.” He sighed. “Alex, I need the music box.” His shoulders slumped. “Adler wants it and he—he threatened my family.”

“The music box.” Alex nodded. “I see.” She took a breath. “That makes sense.”

“What is so important about this damn music box, Alex? I mean sure it’s valuable but…”

Alex pulled out the chair next to him and sat down. “Neal, it’s not *just* a music box.”

“Okay.”

She ran a hand through her hair, the gold and diamond sub-band on her wrist flashing. “It’s a cipher. A clue. What Adler really wants is what the music box will lead him to.”

“Which is what?”

“A Nazi submarine filled with art.” She met his eyes. “A *lot* of art, Neal.”

“How do you know this?”

“Because my grandfather was the last radio operator who had contact with that submarine.” She sighed. “I’ve been looking for it my whole life. It’s my big score. My white whale.”

“Oh.”

“Neal, if Adler gets a hold of it we’ll lose it. All that history.”

“All that money?” Neal returned.

She smirked. “Doesn’t hurt.”

“I never said we’d give it to him.” Neal took a deep breath and exhaled. “We have to draw him out, Alex. We have to draw him out and put an end to him.”

“You want him to go to prison?”

“I’d rather he was dead but I’ll settle for prison.”

Alex reached out and took his hand. “Neal. Did he…” she swallowed.

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Okay.” Alex nodded. “Okay.” She took another breath. “I’ll help.” She continued to nod. “I’ll help.”

Neal knew he was dreaming but that didn’t change how real it felt. Didn’t change the fear that soaked his skin and pajama pants with sweat. He woke up shaking, shoving the hair off his face with one hand while he peeled off the sheet stuck to his bare chest. He could feel his equilibrium shift, that dizzy sensation that was a horrible prelude to a Drop. He grabbed for his phone and tried to decide if he was actually going to call someone and who he was going to call if he *did* call someone.

His thumb hovered over the phone surface for a moment before he pressed down, putting the phone to his ear before he could change his mind. It rang twice before Peter picked up.

“Neal? It’s three in the morning.”

“I know.” Neal licked his lips. “I’m Dropping, Peter.”

He heard a soft exhale.

“I’ll be right there. Drink a glass of water and then kneel in the living room—on a cushion.”

Neal swallowed, the order made him feel steadier. “Yes, Peter.”

“Good boy.” He paused. “I’m going to stay on the phone with you, okay?”

“Okay, Peter.” Neal got to his feet and headed to the kitchen for a glass of water and drank it, half-listening to Peter’s steady stream of soothing remarks before he headed over to the couch and grabbed a cushion, tossing it onto the floor and dropping down onto his knees. He still felt shaky and his head buzzed but at least he had Peter in his ear.

Peter got there in record time, reassuring June for a moment before he headed upstairs and let himself into the apartment. He walked over to Neal, sitting down on the couch and putting a hand in Neal’s hair. “Hey, buddy.”

“Peter...” Neal lifted his head up a bit and glanced at Peter. “I had a nightmare.”

“It’s okay, I’m glad you called me.” He continued stroking Neal’s hair. “You want to climb up here?”

Neal nodded.

Peter shifted back a bit on the couch and patted his lap in invitation. Neal swarmed up into Peter’s arms, pressing his face against Peter’s chest with a soft whine. “I’m glad you’re here.”

“All you have to do is call.” Peter rubbed his back. “You’re okay now. You’re safe.” He kept rubbing Neal’s back, whispering into his ear. Drawing him away from the precipice. Patiently waiting until Neal had stopped trembling and his breathing evened out. “That’s my good boy.”

Neal shivered.

“Go take a shower and change, I’ll put fresh sheets on your bed.”

Neal nodded. “Yes, Peter.”

Peter helped Neal to his feet and got him started toward the bathroom before heading to the linen closet. After he changed the sheets he peeled an orange and got another glass of water for Neal, settling back on the couch to wait. Neal padded out of the bathroom a few minutes later, scrubbing a towel through his hair, redressed in fresh pajamas.

“Come here, brat.” Peter beckoned.

Neal sat down next to Peter and eyed the Dom with a raised eyebrow.

“You are going to eat this orange and drink another glass of water.” Peter picked the plate and a slice of orange. “Then it’s bed time.”

Neal sighed softly, scooting closer to Peter and resting his head against the man’s shoulder. Peter fed him the orange one slice at a time before helping with the water and escorting the now sleepy submissive to bed.

Peter slipped off his shoes, laying down next to Neal, who laid his head on Peter’s chest and fell into a dreamless sleep.

Neal stayed home from work the next day on the condition he not be alone, so he invited Mozzie over. Mozzie, who for some reason Neal couldn’t quite fathom, had brought over Parcheesi.

“I don’t think I’m very good at this game.”

“That is because you, my friend, rely far too much on looks to win games. Parcheesi is about *skill*.”

“Chess is about skill, Moz.” He rolled the die. “This just seems ridiculous.” He pouted. “What about Mouse Trap?”

“It’d be more fun to *build* a mouse trap.” Mozzie took a sip of his sangria. “So, what is it you’re avoiding telling me?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, the Suit obviously let you stay home today so maybe you should tell me why.”

Neal wrinkled his nose. “I had a nightmare last night and I had to have Peter come over to keep me from Dropping.”

“Oh. Well, no wine for you then.” Mozzie snagged his friend’s wine glass.

“Moz—”

“No wine. You and I both know that depressants are a no-no for at least a day after a Drop or near-Drop.”

Neal sighed. “Fine.” He gave Mozzie a look. “You know, for a Neutral, you’re really bossy.”

“Bossiness isn’t an indication of dynamic.” Mozzie waved a hand. “Alex is bossy.”

Neal sighed. “How did you know I met with Alex?”

“Because I know all.” Mozzie rolled the dice next, moving his piece. “Adler wants the music box, who else would you talk to?”

“Fair enough.” Neal sighed. “She’s agreed to help.”

“She feels guilty.”

“A bit.” Neal eyed the board. “She’s going to meet with me in a couple days.”

“Does the Suit know that?”

“He does.”

“Does he know you’re planning on stealing the music box from wherever it is?”

“Probably.” Neal gave Mozzie a look. “Nothing is final yet.”

“Did you go to therapy this week?”

“Yes I did. It was horribly painful and I never want to go back but I have to anyway.” Neal sighed.

“I feel like you might be exaggerating a touch, but I’ll humor you because I know you hate it.” Mozzie smiled.

“Gee, thanks, Moz.”

Moz played through another turn before sighing. “All right, kid, break out the chess board.”

Neal grinned. “Finally.”

“It’s in the Italian consulate,” Alex said. “In a safe.”

“As in the consulate here in New York?”

“Yup.” She tossed her head. “The Italian ambassador has an eye for black market artifacts.” She pulled a file from her bag. “I’ve got some of the layout here. Luckily for us, in a little more than a month they’re hosting a benefit.”

Neal gave her a look and opened the file. “You planning on snagging a date?”

“There’s a very promising duke I have my eye on.” She grinned. “Now. Are we planning a heist?”

Neal grinned back. “Just let me call Mozzie.”

The heist, Neal thought, went pretty damn well. They had the music box in hand. No one got pinched. Mozzie, Alex and Neal stood around his dining room table, the music box between them. It was beautiful. Amber mosaic tiles set on gold. When the lid was opened it played it’s tune.

“So...where’s the treasure map?” Mozzie asked.

Alex pulled the missing cherub from her pocket. “Well, first you need a key.” She placed it in the corner and twisted, a soft click sounding. Alex opened the box and a small hatch opened down from the lid. A metal comb was sitting inside the compartment. Alex picked it up, handing it to Neal.

“Looks like it fits over the cylinder.” Neal frowned, snapping it into place. “A musical code?”

“Let it play.” Mozzie nodded toward the box.

Neal shut the box again and opened it. The new tune was a bit disjointed. “Could be a code,” Neal admitted. “It’ll take time to—”

A loud knock interrupted him.

“I have a bad feeling,” Mozzie said.

Neal bit his lip, tossing a sheet over the music box and heading for the door. “June?”

“No, it’s Peter. Open up.”

Neal felt his stomach twist. “Coming!” He glanced at the other two.

Alex shrugged.

Neal shook his head and headed for the door, opening it with as innocent an expression as he could manage. “Hey, Peter.”

“Don’t ‘Hey, Peter,’ me, young man.” Peter pressed past Neal, eyeing Alex and Mozzie skeptically. “I hear the Italian consulate had a little heist today.”

“Really?”

“That’s one, Neal,” Peter warned sharply. He glanced at the table. “What did I say about keeping me informed?”

“Uh...you said I should.” Neal made a face. “Look, the less you knew the better. You know, plausible deniability.”

“Plausible—” Peter took a deep breath. “Mozzie, you should leave.”

“Too right, Suit.” Mozzie nodded, grabbing his coat and heading for the door, squeezing Neal’s shoulder in support on his way out.

“I’ll just—” Alex started.

“Stay right there.” Peter pointed at her. “We’re going to have a chat.” He pulled the sheet of the music box and shook his head. “Dammit, Neal.”

“We need it to draw out Adler,” Neal said. “You know we do.”

“Yeah, and I also know you kept me out of the loop because you were planning on going behind my back.”

Neal couldn't refute the statement.

“Now, Miss Hunter.” Peter turned his attention to Alex. “Are you or are you not supposed to be under state supervision after that little escapade with Spanish silver?”

“Well, technically...” She twisted her sub-band around on her wrist absently. “I mean. Well yes but—”

“Who is your Dominant guardian?”

Alex sighed. “Special Agent Diana Berrigan. She was part of the team that caught me with the silver.”

“Diana Berrigan?” Peter confirmed.

“Yeah, why?”

“I trained her. I didn't realize she'd gotten herself tangled up with a submissive ward.”

“I thought she was in DC,” Neal said.

“She is,” Alex replied. “That's why I'm in New York.”

“Ah hah,” Peter nodded. “I'll give her a call, meantime, Neal—corner. Miss Hunter, you sit down while I find out what Diana wants me to do with you.”

The two subs obeyed, sulkily, and Peter prepared himself for what was bound to be a very *long* night. He pulled out his phone and dialed, smiling when the phone was picked up.

“Diana, it's Peter. Boy, do I have a story for you.”

Alex flinched.

Neal couldn't help fidgeting. Now that he'd gotten over the initial shock of Peter showing up, he was settling into a less than friendly state of mind. He deserved a shot at Adler. He had a plan. It was a pretty good one. Baiting Adler would have brought him out into the open. *And then I could kill him.* Neal frowned. The plan hadn't necessarily been to kill Adler. Neal figured that he could call in a tip to the feds a few minutes before he met with Adler.

Peter probably wasn't going to like that plan.

I want Adler dead.

Deep down, under the carefully constructed façade of charm Neal was filled with a roiling mess of anger, shame and guilt. It was a black cauldron of emotion he'd been ignoring for a

long time. The therapist had tried to chip away at it. Peter had managed time and again to pull him out of it, but it was always there. Maybe it was smaller now than it had been, but Neal had been living with it for a long time in one form or another.

He was pretty sure he'd had it ever since the day he found out his father wasn't the man he'd thought he was. The anger at least had been there. The shame was more recent and the guilt? The guilt was probably the most annoying thing. Neal never used to feel much guilt. Sure, Adler had always been able to force Neal into a sink of guilt, but that was Dynamic manipulation pure and simple. This was different, this was a genuine emotion, all tangled up with the rest of them and Neal only had this brief experience with how to handle it.

He was already keyed up from the post-heist high, but now he was focused back on Adler and that made him angry. *Ellen is in danger and it's my fault. I have to fix it. Peter needs to let me fix it.* Neal furrowed his brow. *Why should I feel guilty for that?*

Peter wrapped up his call with Diana and put Alex out on the porch before he called Neal over to the couch.

"Come here, Neal."

Neal stiffened and then turned around to look at Peter. "No."

Peter raised an eyebrow. "Excuse me?"

"I said no." Neal raised his chin. "Stealing the music box was necessary. We have to draw him out and this was the best way to do it."

"Come here, Neal." Peter pointed at the space between his shoes. "Right now."

Neal shook his head, eyes flashing.

Peter eyed his boy carefully. He could see the tension across Neal's shoulders and he could read the conflict flickering across Neal's face. He looked like an animal tensed to run. Peter weighed his options carefully. Neal needed release and reassurance but he also needed to know Peter wasn't going to let him get away with pushing like this while also knowing that Peter knew he was a grown man who could make his own decisions.

Peter stood up, rolled up his sleeves and marched over to Neal. Neal looked him in the eye, an obvious challenge written across his face. "What?" he snapped.

"You're out of line."

"Peter—"

Peter cut him off, grabbing Neal by the arm and swatted him sharply before dragging him recalcitrant submissive toward the dining room table, pulling out a chair. Peter sat down and pulled Neal over his lap before Neal could argue about it. Peter didn't take the time to fuss with Neal's pants just then and started spanking. He had to get Neal in more submissive frame of mind.

He spanked hard and fast. Neal thrashed and bucked, trying to get free. Peter adjusted his grip on Neal's waist and kept going. "You don't get to decide when to obey a rule, Neal. You break a rule; you get a spanking. You don't get to tell me no like a petulant child."

Neal whined and continued to kick. He was still angry but Peter was using his Dom voice and the guilt that had been roiling around with the anger had started to rise to the surface. Peter kept a continuous eye on Neal's shoulders and an ear out for the sounds he was making. He spotted the shift almost immediately. Neal stopped fighting, reduced only to kicking and yelping in reaction to swats. The change was enough for Peter to pause and help Neal stand up.

Neal let a little sound in confusion, eyeing Peter.

"Pants down," Peter ordered.

Neal wanted to shake his head.

"Neal, I don't have a hairbrush on me or you'd be getting it. What you will be getting is a spanking now and another spanking before bed every other night for a week—now take down your pants."

With *that* ominous pronouncement hanging over his head, Neal hurried to get his pants unfastened, slipping out of his shoes and then pushing his pants down. Peter pulled him back over his lap and tugged Neal's boxers down before he resumed the spanking. "We both know you kept me out of this because you were considering doing something you would regret."

Neal whined in response, gripping Peter's leg to keep his balance.

Peter's pace was resolute, each smack cracking against Neal's reddening skin with precision. "I know about the gun, Neal."

"What gun?"

Peter adjusted Neal's position and laid a dozen smacks to Neal's sit spots. Neal whined again, burying his face against Peter's pant leg. "I wasn't—I wasn't going to. Peter I wasn't going to use it!"

Peter shook his head and kept spanking. "I want the gun when we're done. You'll be grounded until we finish this thing. I will not let you let your anger eat you alive. I'm not going to let you turn into that person, Neal. You *are not* that person."

Neal shuddered under the weight of those words. *He should hate me. He should give up on me. Why does he even bother?* Neal started to cry softly.

"You're my family, Neal. Family doesn't give up on. I might get frustrated with you. I might have trouble completely trusting you, but I never want you to doubt that I care about you." The next few swats *really* stung and Neal's uncertain tears broke out completely. "I love you and I'm not going to let you destroy everything you've accomplished with one mistake."

He loves me? The cauldron had settled a bit now, anger seeping away and guilt burning off with every stinging, burning smack. It didn't quite touch the shame, but nothing had yet, not really though that pit got a little smaller every day.

"There you go," Peter encouraged. "Let it go. Show me my good boy."

With a choked sob Neal slumped, losing the will to kick or thrash and simply giving in to the pain. "M'sorry," he whimpered. "I'm so-so sorry."

"That's my good boy." Peter continued the spanking a bit longer, making his point clear before he stopped. "I forgive you." He rubbed Neal's back, giving him time to settle down a bit before he tugged Neal's boxers back up and helped him to his feet, standing up with him so he could fold Neal into a tight hug. "There you are, it's all right now." He kept rubbing Neal's back. "Good boy."

They stood for a few moments longer before Peter led his teary-eyed boy over to the couch and settled Neal into his lap for a proper cuddle. Once Peter had a settled, very sleepy, submissive in his arms he coaxed Neal into bed and tucked him in. He left him with a glass of water on the nightstand and headed out onto the porch where Alex was still waiting. She was giving him a very assessing sort of look.

"Neal's sleeping now," Peter said. "Did you know he bought a gun?"

Alex's eyes widened. "No." She shook her head. "He said the plan was to call in the feds once we had a bead on Adler." She swallowed. "I don't do guns. *Neal* doesn't do guns."

"Well, this time he did." Peter sighed. "Diana should be here soon."

Alex sighed. "Great. Is she mad?"

"A bit." Peter nodded. "Are you okay to wait for her?"

She sighed again. "Yeah. I'm not exactly a typical submissive. Morally bankrupt thief and all."

"If that were true, Diana wouldn't have bothered with you." Peter smiled at her.

"You—you're really good with Neal. After everything he's been through. I mean—" she bit her lip. "Thank you. Thank you for taking care of him."

"You're welcome." His phone buzzed. He glanced at it quickly. "Diana's here. I'll go let her up. You can go sit with Neal if you like, but you can't leave. Understand?"

Alex nodded.

"Good." Peter took a breath and headed out to fetch Diana.

Alex took a moment before heading back inside, slipping off her heels and padding over to Neal. She sat on the edge of the bed. He looked young. He looked settled and calm. She brushed his hair away from his face. They'd had a fling once, and while it hadn't lasted she'd

always thought Kate wasn't good for him. It was good to see him like this. Good to see that Peter was a good Dom. That Neal was in safe hands.

Because they had a fight coming, and they were going to need Peter if they were going to come out of it with Neal in one piece.

Chapter End Notes

Up next, Fowler makes a move.

Moving Forward

Chapter Summary

It's a bit short, I know but I kind of stalled a bit and then I got to where I ended and just sort of thought, hey, that's where it needs to end.

So yeah.

Diana eyed her now sleeping ward with a headshake, padding over to Peter. “They look so innocent when they’re sleeping, you can almost forget they skated out of felony convictions.”

Peter smiled. “Neal has this puppy-dog stare that’s *almost* better than El’s. He gets this look on his face with his hair mussed and it’s all I can do not to cave.”

Diana smirked. “Softie.” She shook her head. “It’s all I can do to keep tabs on Alex. She didn’t earn a tracking anklet because they couldn’t pin enough of the stolen silver to her.”

“You feel up to helping me with this sting?” Peter asked, nodding toward the music box. “We catch Adler. We put him behind bars and Neal can start really putting that time behind him.”

“What do you think Neal will do after all of this is over? You know, after he’s served his time?”

“I don’t know, but we’ll do our best to figure out some options for him.” Peter glanced back at the box. “This seems like a silly thing to threaten lives over.”

“Adler’s a greedy bastard,” Diana replied. “But yeah, I’ll stay. I’ll help you catch Adler. Alex needs clear of this mess just as much as Neal does.”

“I can’t argue with that.” Peter sighed. “Thanks.”

“No problem, boss.”

Neal wasn’t sure if there would ever be a time when, looking back on the events of the past few months, he wouldn’t be thankful that Peter and El walked into his life. Well, other than those brief moments during a spanking when he was regretting ever meeting Peter because Peter had the hardest hand he’d ever felt.

Still, he was pretty sure he wouldn’t change a thing.

The sting had been arranged and Neal was stuck staying in the Burke's guest room since officially he was grounded until this whole thing was over. Diana had decided it would be best if Alex stayed with him, Peter had the room and it meant there was another pair of eyes keeping track of the wayward fence.

Dinner was certainly an interesting time.

"So, Alex, you've known Neal for a few years?" El asked, forking some salad and chewing meditatively.

"Yeah." Alex nodded enthusiastically. "We met when I tried to con Adler for information about the music box. We didn't work together until later though when Neal needed a fence for this—" She paused, glancing at Neal. "Is the statute of limitations up for that yet?"

"I'm not sure." Neal frowned. "Best not talk about it."

"That seems wise," Peter said. "I prefer not arresting people at dinner."

"Good rule, hon," El said. "I prefer you not arresting people at dinner too. It's a bit rude."

Peter smiled, leaning over to kiss his wife. "Anything to make you happy."

Elizabeth shook her head. "Uh huh."

"Hey, you wanted a dog and we got a dog."

"I also wanted you to paint the downstairs bathroom." She gave him a look.

Peter groaned.

Neal shot a look at Alex, grinning. Alex returned the smile.

"I'm glad you called me, Neal," Alex said.

"Me too."

Peter got everyone together at his place the next day to plan the sting. Which of course gave everyone ample opportunity to meet Ellen and ask a great many questions about what Neal had been like as a child. Neal was only mildly embarrassed about all of it.

The plans for the location of the exchange were spread out on the table, as well as every file they had on Adler and because Elizabeth and Mozzie were there—snacks.

"This feels like old times," Alex said. "I didn't realize the feds did it too."

"They just call it a sting and get legal backing," Neal explained. "But it's basically the same thing."

"That seems horribly unfair somehow."

“You won’t hear any argument from me.” Neal grabbed a cracker from the tray and munched. “Let’s run through the con.”

“Sting,” Peter corrected. “But yeah, run the game plan, Jones.”

“First off, Neal contacts Adler—”

Neal wasn’t a hundred percent certain this was even going to work. He wasn’t even sure Adler was going to show. He could just as easily send an intermediary. But Alex seemed to think Adler would show up himself, that the music box was worth enough to make the snake come out of his hole. Still, waiting out in the open for the man who still haunted his nightmares had Neal on edge.

“Neal, it’s good to see you again.”

Neal barely kept himself from startling and glanced over at the man. “I can’t say the feeling is mutual.”

Adler smiled. “You look good, little boy. Someone’s been taking good care of you.”

“Better than you ever did.” Neal raised his chin. “You threatened my family.”

“Now, now Neal, I took good care of you. I gave you exactly what you needed.”

“Bull shit. You abused me and if I had it my way, someone would put a bullet in your head.”

Adler raised his eyebrows. “Strong words, little boy.”

“Don’t call me that.” Neal took a deep breath. This was actually going a lot better than he’d expected it to. He hadn’t punched Adler for one thing, even though he really wanted to and he was actually feeling pretty steady. Although that might have had more to do with the Respidol he took beforehand. “Let’s just get this over with.”

“Always so impatient.” Adler shook his head. “All right, where’s the music box?”

“In a safe place.”

“If I don’t get it, I promise you won’t like what happens to your friends.”

“You know, it’s interesting. It’s interesting you’re so obsessed with the box all of a sudden and I sort had to ask myself *why*. Why now?” Neal smiled. “So I took a closer look at a few things. You’ve run out of money. You need this score. You spent the last of your money funding this expedition for the treasure. You’ve got all sorts of interesting people looking for you. Dangerous people.”

“Your point?”

“I have friends. Talented friends. I made sure you don’t have any more holes to crawl back to. I made sure you didn’t have any money left either. And then I drew you here.”

Adler frowned.

“I know you left me broken, Adler. But I didn’t stay that way.” Neal waved, signaling Jones. “And now—now you’re going to spend the rest of your life behind bars.”

Adler pulled a gun the moment Jones and the other agents started toward him, pointing it straight at Neal. “They take one more step and I’ll shoot him in the head.”

Diana didn’t so much as hesitate, shooting Adler in the shoulder. The gun fell out of his hand and Jones was on the man in a shot, kicking the gun away and cuffing Adler.

“Nice form, Diana,” Neal said.

“Thanks, Neal.”

“I need a hospital!”

“Shut up, you’ll be fine,” Diana snapped.

Peter trotted up next, flashing a smile at his people. “Well done.” He glanced at Neal. “Come on, kid, there’s paperwork to fill out.”

“I don’t know if I’ve ever been happier to hear you say that, Peter.” Neal flashed a smile. “Seriously.”

“Out of curiosity,” Peter started as they headed toward the car, “where is Alex right now?”

“No idea.” Neal shrugged. “But I’m sure Diana will find her.”

“Yeah. I’m sure she will.”

“It feels a bit anticlimactic,” Neal remarked. “He’s behind bars, I still kind of wish he was dead though.” He took a drink from his wine glass.

Jones nodded, sipping at his beer. “I can understand that.”

Alex took a seat on the couch next to them. “You know, I kind of hoped we’d actually find the treasure.”

“We still might.” Neal gave her a look. “If it’s as historically significant as you think it is I’m sure we could convince the feds to get involved in the search.”

“Somehow that just doesn’t seem as fun.”

“Fair enough.” Neal nodded in acknowledgement.

“If we find it ourselves we could snag the finder’s fee,” Mozzie remarked. “Of course, that would mean the government would cut us a check, which Neal would have to cash and then split between us because obviously the feds can’t know my name.”

“Obviously,” Neal said.

Alex smirked.

“All right, I feel like this is a group I should keep an eye on,” Peter said, approaching them with a beer in hand.

“Hey,” Jones protested.

“You can’t fool me Jones, I know what you did to Agent Woodward.”

“You can’t prove a thing.” Jones grinned.

“I know, because if I could you would’ve gotten a spanking.”

Jones continued to grin.

“Is the living room the sub club?” El asked, carrying over a tray full of snacks. “Because it’s been ages since I got a chance to chat.” She glanced at her husband. “Which means you should probably go to the kitchen, hon.”

Peter rolled his eyes.

“You heard the lady,” Neal said. “Shoo.”

Peter gave him a look. “Shoo?”

“You heard me.”

“You heard him,” El tacked on.

“Ganged up on in my own home.” Peter shook his head. “Fine, fine. Gossip all you want.” He kissed Elizabeth on the cheek and headed off to the kitchen.

El turned back to the others and smile before setting down the tray. “Sometimes it’s just nice to get away from all the dominance and posturing, you know?”

“Yeah,” Alex nodded. “I know. Neal does enough posturing and he’s not even a Dom.”

Neal rolled his eyes. “You’re never going to let that go, are you? It’s not my fault you bought my act and hit on me.”

Jones smirked. “I take it you don’t date subs?”

“That would be no,” Alex replied. She gave him a look over. “Although, you could try to change my mind.”

“I do like a challenge.”

Elizabeth took a seat next to Neal and smiled. “I wanted to say, I’m really proud of you Neal. Facing Adler like that? That was pretty amazing.”

“Thanks, Elizabeth.”

She reached out and took his hand, squeezing gently. “You ever think about staying on with the FBI after your four years are up?”

“Well I do thrive in danger and stress.” He smiled. “I don’t know. I guess we’ll find out in four years.”

“I guess we will.”

Four Years Later

The gallery was relatively empty this early the day. Neal smirked as he slipped past security and into the storage room with a forged ID badge he’d spent less than ten minutes on. It was a matter of a wink and a smile to get in and out with his prize in hand.

He was a few yards from the door when a woman stopped in front of him. She was tall, red hair flashing in the sun light. “Stop right there Mr. Caffrey.” She smiled, flashing white teeth. “Under half an hour. You were right, the security here is terrible.”

“I told you.”

“You did.” She shook her head. “Well, Sterling Bosch thanks you for your consultation.”

“Not a problem at all Ms. Ellis.” He handed over the case he’d walked out with.

“Sara, please.”

“Then you have to call me Neal.”

“All right, Neal.” She smiled, brushing her hair out of her face, the gold of her sub-band gleaming. “I’ve got another security check next week at the Harper Gallery.”

He pulled out his phone and checked his schedule. “I should have time for that.”

“Great. Usual fee?”

“I am a fan of the usual fee.” He grinned. “I had no idea how much money a consultant could make.”

“You should start taking on some retrievals. Those finder’s fees can really stack up—though I hear you know all about that.”

Neal shrugged. “I got lucky.”

“Uh huh.” She arched an eyebrow. “Lucky.”

“Yeah, lucky.” He flashed another smile. “I don’t suppose you might want to get a drink later? I mean, I have a consult for the FBI but I’ll be free after that.”

She smiled. “You—you date subs?”

“Exclusively.”

“Me too.” She gave him a very assessing look. “All right, Neal. A drink.” She leaned toward him. “And Neal.”

“Yeah?”

“I like the hat.”

“You got a date with her didn’t you?” Peter asked as Neal walked into the office, a huge smile on his face.

“Yes, yes I did.” Neal glanced at his Dom. “Best part is, she already knows all about my sordid past—and doesn’t care.”

“Oh, that’s the best part?”

“Yup.” Neal nodded. “So, what did you need me to consult on?”

“We caught wind of an up and coming forger.” Peter grabbed the file from his desk and handed it over. “Seems they specialize in Raphael.”

Neal flipped open the file, eying the photos. “This is *St. George and the Dragon*. They’re sure it’s a forgery?”

“They are. I was hoping you could take a look at it, give us an idea of who’s responsible for it.”

“I don’t have to look at it.” Neal frowned. “I recognize the work.” He took a deep breath and sighed. “I don’t suppose you know where we can find Kate Moreau.”

A Bad Penny

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Kate Moreau, Neal decided, was like a bad penny. He hadn't seen her in years, hadn't wanted to see her. She was the last part of his past with Adler. He'd wanted to bury it all away.

"So," Mozzie said. "Kate's back." He narrowed his eyes. "You okay?"

"I don't know." Neal shook his head. "I thought she was gone for good, you know?"

"Yeah." Mozzie sipped at his glass of wine. The past four years had been good to Mozzie. He'd gotten a substantial finder's fee for helping recover the U-Boat treasure, and with those funds as start-up capital, Neal and Mozzie started a consulting firm that worked with everyone from the FBI to high-end insurance brokers. Mozzie got to remain in the shadows while Neal ran point and they even helped legitimize a few of their fellow cons. It was a good business model, they made *very* good money and still had fun doing it.

"What's going on?" Alex swanned into the office. "Oh, and Neal, you owe me twenty bucks. Winthrow tried to hire Gordon Taylor to steal a ball from Yankee stadium. I warned Taylor off."

Neal shook his head. "Did you let Taylor know about that consulting job I lined up for him?"

"Yup." She nodded. "He was appreciative." She plopped down at her desk. "So...what has you two all glum?"

"Kate Moreau," Neal said. "Looks like she's back."

Alex wrinkled her nose. "I guess that explains why Diana's been texting me."

"And you haven't answered her?" Mozzie raised an eyebrow. "That seems mildly suicidal."

Alex shrugged. "I can handle my Domme. Now, what are you planning to do about Kate?"

"I don't know." Neal sighed. "They've got a bead on her for forgery. I'd be happy to see her behind bars, you know? It's where she belongs."

"I get that." Alex frowned, fiddling with the tags on her tasteful black leather collar. "She hurt you."

"While the FBI searches for her their way, I think we should put word out through the network." Neal licked his lips. "The faster we find her, the better."

None of them could really argue with that.

Neal had dinner with Peter scheduled that evening, and for the first time in a long time, he considered skipping it. He wanted to brood by himself, drink a bottle of wine—try to lose himself in something else. He didn't want to think about Kate. He didn't want to think about Adler. He'd spent years pulling himself out of the morass that Adler made of his life. Getting better, focusing on therapy and finding his way back into a healthy submissive relationship.

He had Peter and El to thank for that. Mozzie. Alex. Diana. Jones. June. Ellen. They were his family now. He couldn't hide from Peter. For one thing, he'd only end up with a spanking if he tried. So he put on a smile, grabbed a bottle of wine and headed over. Things were a bit different these days in the Burke household. The family had expanded last year to include baby Neal, now nearly a year old and with a smile as big as his name sake's.

"Hey, Neal," El smiled, Little Neal on her hip. "I heard you've had an interesting day."

"You could say that." Neal leaned in, kissing her on the cheek. "Hey buddy." He smiled at Little Neal.

"And you brought me wine."

"Of course." Neal followed her into the kitchen. "Where's Peter?"

"Finishing up a project in the basement." El settled the baby into his highchair and turned back to Neal. "Are you okay?"

"I don't know." Neal set the wine down on the counter. "I thought I'd put it all behind me. You know?"

"Yeah, sweetie, I know." She put a hand on his arm. "But Peter will find Kate and she'll go down for these forgeries."

Neal nodded. "Yeah."

"You talk to Mozzie?"

"My support system has been informed, yes." Neal walked to the cupboard and pulled down three glasses. "What's for dinner? It smells great."

"*Osso buco* and polenta with greens." El retrieved the corkscrew and took the bottle. "I thought you might want some comfort food."

Neal smiled. "Thanks, El."

She opened the wine, setting it aside to breathe. "And if you're good, there's pistachio gelato for dessert."

"Ooh."

Footsteps alerted them of Peter's approach. "Hey Neal."

“Peter.” Neal smiled. “Any news?”

“Not yet, but I’ll let you know.” Peter ruffled his hair, Neal making a face in distress. “You going to stay here tonight?”

“I wasn’t planning on it.” Neal raised his eyebrows, a question written on his face.

“Maybe you should.”

Neal was aware it wasn’t an order, Peter didn’t really do *orders* these days, but he did make firm suggestions. Neal sighed. It wasn’t like he had other plans really, and yeah, it was probably a good idea to spend time with his Dominant Guardian when he was a bit rattled. The best way not to get himself into trouble was to keep himself on an even keel.

“Okay.”

Peter smiled. “Great.”

“And dinner is ready,” El announced. “Come on boys.”

Neal spent the night, taking a nice dip into Subspace kneeling after dinner. He headed into the office relaxed and ready to face the day. He’d rescheduled his drink date with Sara, he had a consulting job lined up with the Tate, and he was meeting with Scott later to check in on his latest assignment. Scott Rivers was the youngest member of their little team, but he had a set of talents that had proved valuable, and taking on the young con had kept him out of jail. Neal liked paying it forward, as it were.

He was usually the first one in, but he wasn’t this morning.

Neal froze, skin prickling. “What are you doing here?”

Kate turned toward him, smiling. “Hello Neal.”

“You can’t be here.” He shook his head, pulling his phone from his pocket.

“Are you really going to call your FBI friends before you hear what I have to say?”

“I don’t want to hear anything you have to say.” He held his thumb over Peter’s number.

“Not even when it’s about George Bennett?”

Neal swallowed. “Where did you hear that name?”

Kate’s smile widened. “Let’s just say that I know where he is.”

“So do I, buried in a cemetery outside DC.”

“No, Neal, he’s not. And if you want him to stay that way, you’re going to help me shake the feds once and for all.”

Okay, he was no longer relaxed.

Chapter End Notes

So...I wasn't sure if I'd ever come back to this fic, but I got bit by some inspiration.

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!