

# The day that Neal didn't run

## CHAPTER 1

Neal felt himself being forced into a van. He couldn't really see much because of the black hood over his head and he fell rather hard on his stomach onto the floor. He scrambled to get up, but before he managed to do much he felt a knee in his back pressing him down, the heavy weight of the guy squeezing the air out of him. The other guy trapped his right leg while bending the left one backwards. Neal knew they were looking for the anklet. They knew about him, about his agreement with the FBI.

A loud buzzing reverberated through the van, and they held his leg tight. Neal fought. He knew the anklet couldn't be cut by a simple pair of scissors and the buzzing didn't bode well for his ankle.

*"Quit struggling",* a gruff voice said.

Neal didn't, he wanted out, away, and wouldn't give up without a fight.

*"You want us to cut your entire fucking foot off?",* one of the men said.

Neal stilled. Okay, he'd rather risk a minor cut from whatever tool they were gonna use than risking the entire foot - that would definitely cause problems for his future escaping possibilities. The buzzing became louder as soon as the tool hit the anklet, but it only took a moment until it went through. A brief connection with the skin, Neal hissed, but the pain was bearable and pretty much felt more like a minor cut when your finger got in the way of a knife cutting vegetables. Neal heard the sound of the alarm and felt kind of comforted by knowing that Peter would be alerted in just a few seconds. Something was wrapped around his ankle, and then his legs were released.

Neal started struggling again when he noticed the one guy leaving him. It was just for a moment, though, apparently to hand over the anklet to a third guy Neal hadn't been aware of.

*"Get rid of this and get going!",* the gruff voice said.  
*"On it!"*.

The words came from the front of the car, the driver probably, Neal thought. The car started moving in the same moment Neal felt both guys on him again. The one pressing him down had definitely been fighting hard to keep Neal from getting out of his grip. He was short of breath when he asked:

*"How far did the other one get?"*.

The other one? Mozzie? Neal did NOT like the sound of that.

*"Not far, I see him now!",* the driver said.

Even though Neal fought hard it didn't take long for the two men to secure him tightly with zip ties on hands and feet and connecting them behind his back. Neal was well and truly stuck!

The van slowed down, but didn't stop completely, before the side door was opened, and Neal heard the two men jump out. He heard a brief sound of surprise, followed by: *"What the..."* and then a bit of struggling and heavy breathing. Though he couldn't see a thing, Neal knew... He just knew!

*"Mozz!!"*, he yelled. *"Don't you dare hurt him!"*, but it was to no avail, because Neal both felt and heard the sound of a person being dumped next to him.

Neal squirmed, tried desperately to get the hood off. To be able to see him, to make sure Mozzie was alright.

*"Tie him up!"*, one of the guys said, *"And you"* - he grabbed Neal's hair through the hood - *"shut up and stop moving around. We didn't hurt him."*, he chuckled. *"Not that much, anyway, he just needs to sleep it off. You know... We wouldn't even take him if it wasn't because of you. We don't really need him. But we know you wouldn't run without him!"*

He let go of Neal's hair, got up and apparently found a place to sit close by. Neal's heart sank. He knew that Peter, the FBI, the Marshals, everyone... everyone would think that he cut the anklet himself. That he cut it and ran. He and Mozz.

*"Don't do anything crazy, Neal!"*, Peter's words rang in Neal's head. *"Peter, I didn't"*, Neal thought. *"Please, believe that I didn't run!"*

Who were these guys? What did they want?

*"I'm about to become the last person on Earth who knows where you are!"*

Maybe in this moment, the man in the fancy boots was right about this, but Neal was going to prove him wrong. Whatever he set his mind to, he could do, and lying there in the back of the van, Neal set his mind to getting out of this as soon as possible. He could do this! He and Mozzie had been in trouble before, but they were smart - and slippery, as Hagen had said it - and as soon as the chance presented itself, they would get out of this mess.

The van was moving at a faster speed now, and Neal concentrated on the way it moved while counting the seconds that soon became minutes. Then his phone rang! His god damn phone was ringing in his pant pocket. These guys weren't professional enough to get rid of his phone, yet they knew about both the anklet and his friend- and partnership with Mozzie?

---

## CHAPTER 2

Peter was just walking around the living room, restless, and dreading tomorrow, when the moving van would be picking up a part of his and Elizabeth's life together. El would go to Washington and they had decided that at first she would live there during weekdays and come back to New York on weekends. He felt that he was ripping away a part of his heart, yet he knew deep down inside that he couldn't leave Neal here, alone, either. Not now. He would see this through. After all, he made the agreement with Neal back then, not Jones, not Diana, not the bureau in general - no, he did... Peter Burke, who always made a show of sticking to his word. He had promised Neal this deal, so he

would stay as long as it was needed.

Elizabeth was still packing her suitcases on the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor, when Peter's phone went off. Not the usual ring tone, but the alarm... The anklet alarm! He grabbed his phone, looked at the display like his eyes were betraying him. No, Neal, no! You didn't do this. Peter dialed the number for the Marshal's office, hoping that this was a mistake. It was not! The office confirmed that the alarm of Neal's tracking anklet went off just a few minutes ago. Not the alarm marking that he stepped out of his radius, no the GPS broke off completely - somebody cut it, Neal must have cut it! Peter disconnected the phone call and was about to call Jones and Diana when Elizabeth came down the stairs.

*"Honey, what's wrong? You look like you just found out Neal ran off or something!"*, she said.

*"He did, hon, he did! I told him not to do anything crazy just a few hours ago"*. Peter cursed: *"Dammit, Neal!"*

Elizabeth grabbed her husband around the waist, pulled him close. Peter was too tense to really notice.

*"Are you sure, he ran, Peter? Would he do something like this now?"*. She kissed him.

Peter sighed. *"I don't know, El, but it looks like it. I have to go to the office. I'll find out... But if he ran...? El... If they find him, he's going back to prison for a very long time."*

Elizabeth looked at her husband. She knew that Neal was disappointed about not getting his sentence dropped, but taking off this soon after knowing? Either he would've have had it planned a long time ago, or something else happened. She didn't voice her thoughts, though. Instead she kissed Peter again and said:

*"Go, hon - go find out. Maybe it was all a mistake!"*

---

On his way to the office, Peter called Diana and Jones and they both promised to join him right away. Both of them were confused about this suddenly happening, until Peter told them about how the higher-ups had declined his request on Neal's behalf. Diana felt sorry for Neal, but she also expressed her anger about him running off and leaving them all behind like nothing had ever happened. Jones turned into his always professional persona and promised Peter that they'd find Neal soon.

*"Yeah, right... Look, I'll see you at the office, Jones!"*, Peter said, but in his mind he wasn't so sure about finding Neal.

Was he even sure he WANTED to find Neal? Neal deserved to be free, right? But was this the way to do it? It wasn't right to keep him tethered for years to come after all he had done, but then again he probably should serve out his time. Peter's thoughts were racing. He had let Neal run once, maybe he could do it again? Peter shook his head, cursed at the traffic and knew for sure that neither the FBI nor the Marshals would ever let Neal run off. They'd keep looking for him, until they caught him - and then they'd lock him up for ages, maybe even for good. Neal didn't deserve that. He was a good man, with a good heart, an intelligent mind. Sometimes he just messed up, made

mistakes. Everyone made mistakes sometimes. After all they were just humans. Peter had made mistakes, too. He knew that! He had called Neal a criminal, but Neal was so much more than that. Peter had seen it clearly these last few days. He had seen Neal's heart break when he found out his "supposed" girlfriend was nothing but a con, a murderer, who had played him all the way. He had seen Neal worry for Mozzie, seen his happy smile and relaxed posture when he found out that Mozzie had pulled through. He had seen Neal's targeted effort to bring down Rachel Turner, the woman with whom he had fell in love in such a way that Neal had compared it to the relationship between Peter and El.

When Peter pulled into a parking space, he could hardly remember the drive from home to the office, but he now knew that whatever the truth was about the anklet being cut, he would have to figure it out fast and then maybe he could save Neal from going back to prison. He would try. He would do this for Neal. But first he would have to find him!

Peter got out of his car, took out his phone and called Neal. If this was all just a mistake, Neal would pick up, and all problems would be solved - at least for now. Peter listened intently to the ringing, and Peter felt kind of comforted by the thought that at least Neal hadn't turned it off. This was a good sign, right?

*"Come on, Neal, pick up"*, he whispered to himself when he walked towards the elevators.

---

The men in the van didn't act upon the ringing as fast as Neal would've suspected, but the one closest to him suddenly mumbled something Neal couldn't decipher. Then he felt himself being patted down and the phone pulled from his pocket.

*"What the fuck, you stupid moron. You didn't take his phone?"*, the man said.

Neal mentally named him "Gruffy", because of his ever so gruff voice.

*"I thought you did it, man!"*, the other one answered and added, *"Just get rid of right away!"*.

Neal heard the phone being dropped to the floor of the van and then somebody stomped on it, no doubt about it splintering into several pieces. Neal hoped. He hoped that the one calling was Peter. Peter was already looking for him, wasn't he?

Next to him, Neal felt a bit of stirring, then some groaning. Mozzie! Neal tried to get a bit closer and quietly called out his friend's name. No reaction. He tried again a little louder, nudging him as much as it was possible in his present situation. Mozzie groaned again at the same time as Gruffy told them to shut up. Neal didn't bother, he needed to know that Mozzie was awake and okay.

*"Mozz, are you okay?"*, he said completely ignoring the order about keeping quiet.

*"I said: Shut up!"*, Gruffy repeated and Neal felt a light kick at his arm like Gruffy wanted to catch his attention.

Neal didn't budge and said: *"Just need to know, he's okay. Mozz? Mozzie, are you okay?"*.

That earned Neal quite a kick in his side, and as he felt one of the guys crouching down next to him his head was pressed into the floor of the van.

*“What's up with you not following simple orders?”*, Gruffy hissed. *“I thought, boss said you were smart. Not likely! Unless you want me to beat the crap out of you even before we reach our destination, you shut up NOW!”*

Neal kept quiet and Gruffy released his grip. For a brief moment Neal pondered how much one could squeeze the human skull until it cracked. He didn't want to find out.

Neal's mind was dragged towards Mozzie again when he felt his friend stirring a little more. He listened intently to find out if Mozzie was breathing all right or if he could convert other sounds into some kind of consolidation that Mozzie was okay. Then he heard a faint clicking sound. The sound of a tongue clicking in a certain pattern. Thank you, Mozz! Neal smiled to himself thankful of the creative mind of his slightly paranoid friend. That wouldn't be a sound the men would easily hear and recognize as being anything but noise from the moving van.

---

Peter was waiting for Neal to pick up and for a second it sounded like he did. Then a loud bump, and the connection was cut. Peter looked at his phone. That was weird! He swore to himself that it sounded like someone picked up and then disconnected. Besides... if it hadn't been picked up it would usually just go to Neal's voice mail.

Peter reached the office on the 21<sup>st</sup> floor and was greeted by Jones who had already arrived. Diana wasn't in yet, but he hadn't expected that either since she needed to find someone to babysit Theo first. He told Jones to track Neal's phone, find out where it had last connected to a cell tower. Jones started to explain that Neal would've turned off his phone and whatever tracing they could find wouldn't help much.

*“I just called him, Jones”*, Peter interrupted. *“It wasn't turned off.”*

*“Why didn't he turn it off, what did he say?”*, Jones asked looking a tad confused.

Peter explained that he hadn't actually gotten a hold of Neal, but the phone had been ringing until the connection was - apparently abruptly - cut.

*“I'll get right on it”*, Jones said, and handing Peter a folder, he added: *“Here's the last known location of the anklet.”*

Skimming through the information in the folder, Peter first thought of how many ways you could get away from the city fast from that position without being caught. Plenty of possibilities, but none of them struck him as being the most obvious. Then something else struck him: Why would Neal cut his anklet in a park area and not in his home?

---

### CHAPTER 3

After seriously considering to invite Missing Persons into the meeting, Peter decided against it - he didn't want to involve that department just yet - and called his most trusted people into the conference room.

*“Listen up, people. I need you to focus on this. We need to find out if Neal cut his anklet”, Peter said.*

*“Uhm, excuse me, boss”, Diana interrupted. “Don’t you mean, WHY Neal cut his anklet?”*

*“No, Diana. I don’t... I don’t have any proof yet, but ... There’s just something about this that doesn’t sit right with me”. Peter silently sighed and continued: “Jones! Pull all data from surveillance cameras around the park and surrounding areas! Then gather a team, head to Neal’s and go through his entire apartment.” He looked straight at Diana: “You find Mozzie! If he’s around, we know for sure that Neal didn’t run.” Peter looked around the room. “I also need someone to talk to Neal’s landlady, June Ellington, and of course send ERTs to the park right away.”*

The agents in the room nodded, confirming their boss' orders and went to work on the various tasks. Peter pulled out his phone and called Elizabeth:

*“Hi hon! I was hoping you could do me a favor and get in touch with Mozzie? You can do that, right?”*, Peter asked his wife.

*“Sure, honey... I’ll see what I can do, but Peter... If Neal ran on his own terms, Mozzie will be gone, too. Neal would never leave him behind - even in his most frustrated and impulsive state of mind”, Elizabeth said, hesitating a bit.*

Peter thought about her words for a second. *“I know, El, which is why I kind of hope that we’ll get in contact with Mozzie soon, so please just...”*

Elizabeth interrupted her husband: *“But that’ll mean that Neal’s in trouble!?”*

*“Neal’s in trouble, no matter what, hon”, Peter sighed. “I just hope it won’t be serious...”*

---

The van was slowing down after what seemed like hours of driving, but most likely was not. Neal had lost count somewhere after approximately 30 minutes. Concentrating on counting seconds and minutes was hard when you also had to make sure your friend was okay while tolerating the rising tension in all muscles from being in a very unhealthy position for so long. His fingers felt numb, his shoulders were aching, his legs were protesting and really needed to be stretched. And oh, how he wished for a fresh breath of air! The van was getting hot, the air dense, and the hood did definitely not make it better. He did have a small gap at the bottom of the hood, though, but all that gave him was a smell of dirt and wet wood.

Finally the van came to a stop. The door opened, and it sounded like both men got out, but to Neal’s disappointment they didn’t let the door stay open. He held his breath for a moment listening to the mumbling voices outside, but he couldn’t make out any of what was being said. However, he was quite sure they were now alone in the van. Apparently, so was Mozzie.

*“What happened, Neal? Who are these guys?”*, Mozzie inquired.

*"I don't know, Mozz. I've been followed the last couple of days..."*, Neal started, but Mozzie broke him off.

*"You've been what? Why didn't you say anything??"*

Neal wished he had: *"I wanted to be sure first, but it's not important now. What I do know is that they must be at least 4 guys. The two who were in here, the driver, and one more."*

*"How do you know?"*, Mozzie asked quickly.

*"I spoke to him. I confronted him in the park right after you left. But I don't know him, he hardly said anything, before ... Well, it happened so fast."*

They spoke softly while Neal recounted what had happened. Mozzie confirmed that he had been knocked out, but he was okay now, none of them could slip their ties and they soon agreed that these people were at least semi-professional.

Suddenly they heard the sound of another car parking outside and more people talking. They were still not loud enough for Neal and Mozzie to really hear much, but soon the door of the van was opened.

*"And the goods are in a decent condition?"*, someone said.

Neal recognized the voice of the man from the park.

*"Maybe a few bruises, but nothing to talk about"*, one of the men from the van answered.

*"Good! We need to get moving right away"*, the man from the park said.

Neal and Mozzie felt the van tip a bit to the side when the men entered, and as bound cattle they were quickly dragged out, carried a short way and thrown onto the floor of something Neal guessed was just another van.

Neal felt a hand grab his left ankle. The man from the park was apparently inspecting the work done with the anklet coming off. He sounded slightly amused when he said:

*"I see you managed to hold still ... almost anyway, when they cut it off, Neal. Good boy!"*, he patted Neal's lower leg, like he was praising a dog for following instructions.

Neal wanted to kick the man and tell him to get his hands off of him, but decided to just keep quiet. He would pick his fights wisely. The more compliant he appeared, the more their captors would be likely to lessen security.

The man jumped out the van, talked briefly to the others and apparently they settled payment right then and there. Neal heard the other van take off, before the man from the park addressed them:

*"Now, behave you two, or I have ways to keep you quiet! We only have a short drive to our destination."*

He shut the door and a moment later the van was moving. A few minutes went by and then both Neal and Mozzie felt the road change.

*"Dirt road", Mozzie said.*

Neal added: *"I think we're far out of the city by now. No easy way to get away or get help - otherwise he wouldn't be by himself".*

Mozzie agreed: *"Well, then it's two against one! Guess we just have to show him our capabilities."*

*"Guess so", Neal said with a smile.*

*"We might need to find a way out of these ties first, though", Mozzie admitted. Then he exclaimed: "HA! Got ya."*

*"What?", Neal asked a bit surprised.*

*"The hood, Neal! Okay, we're definitely in a van - an old one of it's kind - and oh?!", Mozzie stopped himself. "Uhm, are you alright? That does NOT look like a comfortable position."*

*"Oh really, Mozz?? I seem to find it very relaxing... Wait... They didn't tie you up like this?", Neal said while trying to gesticulate with his hands and feet. "Help me get the hood off, will ya?"*

Mozzie scrambled a bit, came closer to Neal and by joint efforts they got off Neal's hood as well. Neal drew in a breath of semi-fresh air and looked around the van. It was definitely old. A few crates in one end, various larger tools, a tool box, a bag... and a worrying amount of zip ties.

*"Okay, what's the plan?", Mozzie asked.*

*"Well", Neal sighed. "I really can't move much here, Mozz, so you need to find something useful to cut the ties. I see several things we can use to neutralize the guy, plenty of zip ties. What's left to do? Cut the ties, get ready, when he opens the door, we attack, tie him up and reverse the roles!"*

*"Sounds easy!", Mozzie pointed out.*

*"It has to be", Neal said.*

And so Mozzie rolled and snaked around the back of the van. At one point he actually managed to get into a sitting position so he could open and go through the tool box. With his hands tied behind his back the vision of what he was doing was limited, so he felt around carefully.

Meanwhile Neal had spotted a vise close by and after some shuffling, some huffing and puffing and a lot of sweating, he got himself on one side next to it and with the edge of one of the jaws, he started sawing at the ties connecting his feet and hands. Now that he had a specific goal, he didn't feel the kinks in his muscles quite as much.



Neal was almost through, and Mozzie had just found something that felt like a wire cutter tool, when the van slowed down, came to a halt and the driver got out. No, not yet! They needed more time. They weren't ready. They looked at each other frantically. Neal's zip tie broke, Mozzie got a good grip on the wire cutter, and the door of the van rolled open...

---

## CHAPTER 4

Peter looked at his watch. It had been a little more than one and a half hour since he got the alarm about Neal's ankle going offline. He was browsing through the various information coming in from his agents in the field. So far without anything seriously useful.

The team in Neal's apartment hadn't yet found anything conclusive pointing in neither the direction that Neal ran nor the direction that he didn't. They were still there trying to find his "go bag". From what Peter had learned about Neal lately, he would expect Neal to hold on to such one, but Peter also feared that Neal would have more than one, so if they did find a "go bag" it wouldn't mean much. Inadvertently, Peter cursed at Neal for doing this to him, for always being so well-prepared.

A call from Jones came in. He had been talking to June, but unfortunately she couldn't help much either. She hadn't spoken to Neal since yesterday, but she was fairly sure that he had been home during the night and didn't leave the house until he went to meet Peter. Her housekeeper confirmed that she had seen Neal leave the house, carrying no bags. Nothing suspicious at all. Actually, Neal had been very happy and in a joyful spirit when June spoke to him yesterday. Peter sighed... That must have been after he told Neal that dropping the rest of his sentence would pretty much be piece of cake. Neal had left the office smiling. So opposite the Neal that had left his front porch this very morning. Hurt. Disappointed. Angry.

Peter knew that an angry Neal could be an impulsive Neal as well, and suddenly he felt the hairs rise on the back of his neck and his heart dropped. Oh, my... Could he? No, he wouldn't! A person could kill himself in many ways, and some of these might cause the ankle's alarm to go off. But Neal wasn't suicidal... was he?? He had lost so much, so many people. Could this lack of freedom be the last drop?

A call coming in on his mobile interrupted Peter's thoughts. It was Diana.

*"Boss", she said, "we found something... I mean... ERT found something."*

*"Something of Neal's?", Peter asked.*

*"No". Diana started explaining that they had recovered a smashed phone close to the park. She knew it wasn't Neal's regular phone, but they would bring it in anyway for the technicians to look at.*

They had also noticed tire marks from a car either breaking or speeding up. They were trying to find out exactly, but it could take a while. Peter thanked her and went to the bullpen to ask the agents going through surveillance footage about any progress.

The young agent was eager to show Peter that he was on to something. He pulled up a

surveillance photo of Neal and Mozzie entering the park. Okay, so they now knew for sure that they had been together shortly before the anklet went off. If Mozzie had been with Neal the chances of him having run suddenly seemed much bigger, Peter thought. He asked the agent about any cars around or if they had been meeting with someone.

*“Nothing yet, Sir”,* the agent replied. *“But I’ll keep looking and let you know right away if I find something”,* he quickly added not wanting to let down his boss’ expectations.

Peter stepped aside, lost in his own thoughts. If Neal had really run this fast after him getting the bad news, he must have had it planned upfront. He must have been ready. He might as well just have played Peter to see if he could be able to get away legally. All the talk about having spoken with a lawyer... Maybe it was all just a con making Peter believe that Neal really did deserve his freedom. He could have just asked Peter for a shorter sentence. Maybe they could have negotiated on a satisfying deal for all parties?

*“Dammit, Neal!”*, Peter cursed quietly on his way back to his office. He kept talking to himself. *“If I find out you ran, and you had this all planned ahead, I swear that I’ll hunt you down!”*

And right after that thought, his mind shifted. There had been no signs that Neal was planning anything pointing towards him running off. Peter’s mind went back to the day of the commutation hearing. Neal hadn’t been planning to run off that day either. Yet he did! And he did it fast. After an almost invisible nod from Peter. Maybe he hadn’t planned this after all? Maybe it was just Neal and the ever supportive Mozzie thinking fast, acting on their impulses.

Maybe something happened to both of them?

Peter shook his head. His thoughts were at turmoil. He was frustrated! He needed to know. He needed to be in control of what was going on. It was far from the first time he had felt this confused and this frustrated lately. Ever since the incident with Pratt everything had been one big mess. With him, with Neal, with El and him, with Siegel, with Rebecca... or Rachel as her name really was. Okay, he needed to do something to get his mind focused on a more specific task.

At the same time an agent knocked on his door. They had tracked down the signal from Peter’s call to Neal’s phone to a location north of where the anklet’s signal went off. Neal couldn’t have moved that far from the park in such a short time without being in a car. They needed to find that car on the surveillance footage!

---

Mozzie cut the ties around his hands, quickly grabbed a hammer from the tool box and reached down to free his feet.

*“So you t... What the hell?”*, the man from the park stared directly at Neal who had actually managed to get into a sitting position, now his hands and feet were no longer connected by a zip tie.

He was obviously scanning the van for Mozzie who was mostly hidden in the back, but seemed a little taken aback that his prisoners weren’t lying on the floor as he had expected. Mozzie threw the wire cutter in Neal’s direction and got ready to attack their captor, but he was no where fast enough. Two more guys stepped up behind the man,

and within seconds they were all in the van, one dragging Neal out by his feet, one pulling out a knife heading for Mozzie, and the man from the park crouching down by the bag quickly searching for something.

Neal was struggling to get out of his captor's grip while trying to maneuver the wire cutter to get his hands free. He tried kicking, tried rolling around, but in the end he fell down on the ground, hard, when he no longer had the floor of the van to support his back. His head hit the gravel, Neal winced and for a moment saw black spots in his vision. He lost the wire cutter at some point and felt his hands and his back scraping across the ground until he was unceremoniously tossed to the side like he was nothing but a bag of potatoes. Man, that guy had to be strong, but then again, Neal thought, he did look a little like The Hulk. That thought was abruptly disturbed by a hard kick to his side.

"Ooww!", Neal groaned and curled onto his side as best as possible. It only resulted in the next kick hitting him in his stomach. The Hulk-wannabe crouched down, grabbed Neal's jaw, held it tight and growled:

"STAY!", making his point clear by pointing his left index finger close to Neal's eyes.

Meanwhile Mozzie fought his own battle in the van. With his fairly small stature, it didn't seem like a fair battle against the far bigger guy holding the knife ready. Mozzie swung the hammer towards the man, and actually managed to hit his left forearm.

"Come on, now", the guy yelled, quickly glancing at the man from the park. Looking back at Mozzie, he added: "*You're gonna regret this!*"

"You know, I might think I already am!", Mozzie said. He wasn't much of a fighter. To be honest he hated fighting. He hated stupid criminals, who couldn't mind their own businesses.

"*Can't we just talk about this? Seriously? I mean.. you do realize, we're kind of colleagues, right?*". Mozzie was babbling. He usually did that when he felt out of his comfort zone, and this? This was definitely NOT his comfort zone. He swung the hammer again, but this time he missed.

At the same time, the man from the park stood up, smiling maliciously. He had something in his hand. Too focused on the man with the knife, Mozzie realized too late that it was a taser. Within a second, two metal prongs penetrated the skin on his arm holding the hammer. He immediately dropped it, fell to his knees. The shock hadn't been really violent, but it was enough to knock him off his feet.

Needless to say, Mozzie's hands were soon once again securely tied behind his back, and he was half carried, half dragged out of the van.

---

Neal took notice of his surroundings. It looked almost like a small forest with huge trees all around, birds twittered, he saw insects flying around and when turning his head, he saw a very old, farm-like house behind him with broken windows and peeling walls.

Then his feet were released, Neal scrambled, but the man from the park got him to his feet, holding a tight grip on his left arm.

*"I thought I told you to behave, Neal!"*, he said.

Then he hit Neal across the side of the head. Not hard, but enough for Neal to flinch and briefly close his eyes. He quickly opened them back up and looked straight at the guy.

*"What do you want from me? Tell me who you are!"*, Neal stated, squaring his back and appearing a little taller than the guy in front of him.

*"I already told you who I am... And what I want? You'll find out soon!"*. He smirked at Neal, turned him around, and shoved him towards the house. *"Get inside! Move!"*

Neal steadied himself. He could still feel tension in his legs from being bound so long. In his entire body actually. But he still caught a glimpse of one of the other men having a tight grip on Mozz, and "The Hulk" carrying some of the stuff from the van.

He slowly walked towards the open, wooden door.

---

## CHAPTER 5

Back in the office Peter received a text message from Elizabeth saying that she had tried both numbers she had for Mozzie, but the one was no longer in existence, and the other went directly to voice mail. She would keep trying, though, and she had of course left a message for Mozzie to get back to her ASAP.

Peter thought back to the phone call from the Marshal's Office that he had received a few minutes ago. They were of course asking about the status of Neal, and Peter had felt enough under pressure to admit that unfortunately Neal had disappeared and that he had no knowledge about his present whereabouts. To avoid the Marshal's Office listing Neal as a wanted fugitive, Peter had to use his best persuading skills saying that he and his team had everything under control and were looking for Neal full force. The Marshal's gave him 1 hour to either find Neal or enough evidence of this not being him on the run.

Since Diana hadn't yet been able to track down Mozzie, and El couldn't reach him by phone either, the doubt in Peter's mind came creeping. If Neal and Mozzie were on the run, they'd already had 2 hours to get away from the city. One more hour before the Marshal's joined the search would give them a head start which would of course be good for the two of them, but it could be a huge disadvantage for the authorities - and in the end it would all fall back on Peter. Anyway, it was too late to do much about that now. He would have to cross that hurdle if and when he came to it.

A few moments later, Diana and a couple of other agents came back to the office and they gathered in the conference room for updates. The technicians were looking at the phone from the location close to the park, and they had concluded that the tire marks outside the park were from a car - most likely a small truck or a van - speeding up. Otherwise, they didn't have much to go by. To see if they could connect the two locations - the park and the spot where they found the mobile - they would have to go through surveillance footage and looking for anything suspicious or any vans or trucks appearing both places.

Diana asked Peter if she could have a word with him in his office. Peter frowned a bit,

wondering what that was all about. It turned out that not that many days ago Mozzie had been a great babysitter for Theo when Diana's regular babysitter quit, and she suggested that maybe she could have June leaving Mozzie a message hinting that something had come up and Diana needed someone to watch Theo. She knew that it would of course be a lie, but she also felt strongly that if Mozzie did check the phone and got the message, he would happily volunteer to look after the baby. Taking in account of course that they weren't on the run. The problem was, though, that Diana didn't have Mozzie's number herself, so they would have to go through June, maybe pretending that Diana had first asked June's help, but she unfortunately had other engagements.

They quickly agreed that it was worth a try. They didn't have many options of contacting Mozzie, so they would have to do work with whatever they could think of.

---

The house was rather dark inside and Neal could hardly see where he was walking while he waited for his eyes to adjust to the darkness. A couple of times he was shoved from behind apparently not moving fast enough down a long hallway. At one point he nearly stumbled, but managed to steady himself against the wall. Neal felt annoyed.

*"Hey, man! I can't see shit here, I'm moving as fast as I can, okay?"*. He was almost ready to yell at the man behind him, but Neal managed to calm himself down enough to speak only with a slightly raised voice.

At the end of the hallway were a door on either side, both were closed. The man from the park grabbed Neal's right arm, pulled him to the side up against the wall and unlocked the door on the left side. Then he unlocked the other door, too, and pointed towards Mozzie.

*"Put him in there, make sure he won't go anywhere - and go get the rest of the stuff from the car"*, he said.

Clearly the man from the park was the one giving the orders at the moment, but Neal had a gut feeling that he wasn't the real boss. The other guy complied right away without saying a word. Neal and Mozzie exchanged a quick glance silently telling each other to be careful, but being separated was definitely a disadvantage for the two of them. They were so much better as a team. They had proved that many times before.

Neal was roughly escorted into the room on the left, and he suddenly felt almost blinded by the powerful fluorescent lights in the ceiling. He quickly looked around. It was a fairly large room with a dirty cement floor, a chair in the middle facing away from the door, a metal table in the corner and that was about it. If it wasn't because of the dirty floor, it almost looked clinical.

Neal heard something being dumped on the floor behind him, but before he found out what, his hands were cut free and he was pushed towards the center of the room. He grabbed onto the chair to avoid tripping and he noticed it was bolted to the floor. Then he turned around and faced his captor.

*"Strip!"*, the man said.

*"What?!"*, Neal asked not being able to hide the surprise in his voice.

*“I said strip”, the man repeated. “Take off your clothes!”*

Neal didn't move.

*“Why??”, he asked.*

The man bent down and pulled out the taser from before.

*“Unless you want me to use force, you start stripping now!”.*

Neal huffed a bit. He knew that a taser could only be fired once before needing a new air cartridge.

*“Tell me why! I doubt you brought me here to look at my abs! Or maybe you want me to be your personal trainer and you need something to look at for...”*

In two quick strides, the man was right in front of Neal, and he was cut off by an immense pain in his chest. Neal screamed, stepped backwards, but felt a new shot of pain in his right arm. He hadn't counted on the taser having a drive stun function as well. He fell to his knees, holding his right arm tight around the chest.

*“Strip! NOW!”, the command sounded from above Neal.*

He was breathing fast, and Neal felt light headed. Damn, how he hated stun guns! He tried to get himself together, but only a few seconds later he felt a new wave of pain hit his arm again. Neal desperately tried to get away, but his already aching muscles just wouldn't move right.

*“You need a hand?”, a voice said. Neal thought it sounded like it was coming from outer space. His head was spinning.*

*“Strip him! I'm tired of this bullshit!”, the man from the park said.*

With trembling fingers Neal started at the buttons of his jacket and shirt. He cast a glance upwards to lock eyes with the man, but all he could focus on was the taser in the hand of a man he slowly began to hate. It looked so incredibly big, like the size of a lawn mower. Who would be mowing a lawn inside a house, Neal thought for a moment. It didn't make sense.

The other guy who had entered the room started pulling of Neal's shoes and socks. Neal kicked at him weakly.

*“I'm doing it! Look, I'm doing it!”*, Neal argued.

Being stripped by strangers was way below his dignity. Okay, stripping on his own wasn't a lot better, but he'd rather do it himself anyway.

The man from the park shook his head and said: *“We told you more than once to behave. I seriously didn't think you were gonna be this much trouble”.*

Having an unknown fellow partly stripping him, and Neal partly stripping himself, he felt

like a little child being helped out of his clothes by an impatient parent.

*"I'll do this! Get your hands off me"*, Neal yelled. He was starting to feel more in control of his body again.

*"Too late!"*, the second guy said while roughly pulling the waistband of Neal's pants out of his hands and the rest of the way off.

Neal was left on the floor wearing only his boxers. It was cold, dirty and he felt like crap, when something soft was thrown at him.

*"Put on this!"*, the man said while his partner gathered Neal's belongings and the bag and left the room.

Neal looked up and saw a light blue t-shirt in front of him. Like that was gonna make him feel much better!

*"Why?"*, he asked staring at the man from the park while getting back on his feet.

*"Why what?"*, the man replied.

*"Why all this?"*, Neal flung his arms.

*"I've been warned about your... skills. Just taking precautions! Leaving you with nothing minimizes the risk of you doing anything we don't want you to. Now..."*, the man pointed at the t-shirt, *"put it on, or my offer expires."*

*"Warned by whom?"*, Neal asked a little resigned.

He picked up the t-shirt and slowly put it on. At least he'd feel a little more comfortable wearing something more than just his underwear, but he didn't like to constantly finding out that these guys knew so much about him without him knowing anything about them.

The man still holding the taser gesticulated to Neal that he should turn around. His hands were pulled back and zip tied once again. They were tight and Neal winced a bit.

*"By whom?"*, he repeated and turned back around to face the man.

*"Who do you think?"*, the guy said and walked out the door. He threw a sideways glance back at Neal who shrugged.

*"Your dad!"*, he said with a smirk, locking the door behind him. A few seconds later the lights went off and Neal was left in complete darkness.

---

## CHAPTER 6

Mozzie still felt a bit dizzy after the close encounter with the taser, and despite his best intentions he didn't struggle much against the man escorting him into the tiny room on the right of the hallway. It appeared to be a small storage room that was no longer in use - or had been emptied for this purpose. On one side was some shelves and in a corner stood a broom and a bucket. The only light came from a single bulb in the ceiling

located right above a chair which Mozzie suspected was meant for him. He was right and soon he was tied down. His arms behind the back and his feet strapped to each leg of the chair.

*“How about leaving that knife of yours somewhere close by?”*, Mozzie said and added: *“From one alleged criminal to another, this really isn't necessary”*.

*“How about you shut up?”*, was the only answer he got before duct tape was wrapped around his chest.

*“That's no way to treat a guest”*, Mozzie complained. *“Do you even know who I am? I have a reputation that you should've heard of. I can do so much more for you if I can move around...”*

Mozzie didn't get to say anything else, before his mouth was covered with another piece of duct tape. Mozzie glared at the man, sending daggers with his eyes, but his attention was quickly dragged away when he heard a scream from across the hall. Neal! Mozzie struggled against his bonds, but the man in front of him just smiled and shook his head a bit. He had done his job very well indeed. Mozzie wasn't going anywhere.

The man turned around, cast a quick glance across his shoulder and said to Mozz while leaving the room:

*“Enjoy yourself! Sounds like your friend isn't...”*

Mozzie growled and if looks could kill, Mozzie felt quite certain that the man would be dropping dead on his way out the door. The door locked with a loud click, but the light stayed on so while listening to Neal's protests from the other room, Mozzie took in all the details of his temporary cell. Because that was what he intended it to be. Temporary!

The room hadn't been cleared completely, he noticed. First of all, the duct tape had been left on one of the shelves, but he also noticed a piece of paper on the floor and a hook hanging on the far end of another shelf. On the back side of the door was a little duster... hanging on a nail. At least that left him with something to work with if.... no, correction, WHEN he got himself out of his bonds. Mozzie set to work!

---

Peter, Diana, Jones and a few of their colleagues were gathered in the conference room in the White Collar office. They were finally getting somewhere. They had a lead! The agents who had been going through the surveillance footage had spotted a truck appearing on the footage both at the park and at the location close by where they had found the crushed mobile on the ground. They were now tracking it down. Though they hadn't been able to connect the owner of the truck to any crimes - that they knew of anyway - they felt fairly certain that they needed a word with this person.

Peter sent off a team led by Jones to go find the guy. He wanted to go with them himself, but his job as an ASAC was more of a desk job, and he knew he should stay in the office leading the investigation from here. For now anyway. He might change his mind if they found out they were on the right track.

Back in his own office Peter checked his watch. He only had 10 minutes left before the



Marshal's would demand to be part of the search. He called June for an update on her task on getting in contact with Mozzie. June were sorry, but she had no news at all. Her ways of contacting Mozzie were limited, too, and she had tried everything, left various messages, but he hadn't returned her calls yet.

Peter thanked her and asked her to get back to him if she heard just the tiniest peep from any of them. She promised and finished the conversation by stating matter-of-factly:

*"They didn't run, Agent Burke. Neal didn't run. You must find them."*

*"I'm doing my best"*, Peter answered.

But was he actually doing his best? He still felt unsure if he wanted to find Neal if he had run on his own terms. The agent in Peter told him, that Neal was a criminal, and if he ran off, cutting his anklet and breaking the terms of his work release, he should be apprehended, but the human being who he'd earlier called Neal's friend would want him to be free. Earlier... That was strange, Peter thought. Weren't they friends anymore? Yes, they were! Peter decided that, right there at this very moment. Whatever his frustrations had been, whatever his confused mind had led him through these past months, his heart told him one thing: Neal was his friend, and he honest to God hoped that Neal would be able to forgive him for his actions lately and look at him as his friend, too. Peter had to find him, not catch him, but find him. There was a difference. Peter saw that now. A big difference! Peter just had to figure out how to make use of FBI's resources to find Neal without catching him...

At that moment one of his agents came bearing more news. The technicians had managed to pull some data from the broken phone. It wasn't Neal's. Peter was just about to say a few curse words, when the agent continued:

*"But it has Neal's phone number in it!"*, he proclaimed, and added: *"We haven't been able to check the voice mail yet, but we will soon."*

*"Do you have a list of calls going in to or out of the phone?"*, Peter asked feeling the rising buzz in his body that he already got when they got closer to solving a case.

*"It'll be here in a few minutes"*, the agent replied. *"I'll get back to you as soon as we have more, Sir, but the list should be on your computer shortly."*

Peter thanked the agent and was already tapping his keyboard to look for the list. Patience, Peter, he said to himself, then decided to go grab a cup of coffee and hopefully that would be enough for the list to appear on his screen when he came back. He had barely left his office before he noticed a couple of Marshals walking through the glass doors. Peter braced himself for the inevitable discussions that would soon be happening.

---

To Neal the time seemed to have stopped entirely. For a while now he'd been left alone in the darkness. Even though his eyes had time to adjust, he really couldn't see much and he'd had to feel his way around which wasn't easy with his hands bound behind his back. He had tried wriggling out of his ties, but they were just too tight and instead of ripping his wrist open in the process he soon decided to try and relax. At first he had

walked around the room, feeling for any sharp edges along the walls or at the table, but to no avail. Finally, he decided to find his way back to the chair - which had turned out to be easier in his mind than in reality. He happened to find it when he bumped a toe against one of the legs. Auch! Shit! Stupid chair, Neal thought.

He sat down. The metal was cold. It wasn't like the room was seriously cold, but consider his clothing, or lack thereof, it was no wonder he felt chilly. He was fidgeting, couldn't sit still, felt the adrenaline leave his body and various aches and tension reappearing. His mind started racing. Now that he had no physical tasks to do, he couldn't help it. What was that about his father? No... Not his father. James! He didn't want to think of him as anything similarly to family. But what did he have to do with this? Neal wondered. He couldn't think of any reasons for James to be holding both him and Mozzie as captives. He must've realized by now that all the evidence of what James had done in his younger days was now in the hands of the FBI. It wouldn't help anything doing this. Of course he would also know that Peter had been released a long time ago, all charges dropped. The only thing Neal could think of as an issue was the fake recording of James admitting to have shot Senator Pratt. Of course that could cause a lot of problems, but on the other hand the only thing James would truly manage by kidnapping Neal and Mozzie would be to put himself on the map all over, making him visible to the FBI. He wouldn't gain anything. Surely, James couldn't believe that he could exchange Neal for the evidence box? And if the FBI believed that James had killed the senator, he would only be targeted even more by making himself a kidnapper, too. Neal was confused! And cold... The chilling sensation seemed to creep slowly into his bones.

For an hour, or maybe even more - Neal wasn't a hundred percent sure - he just sat there. Waiting. Thinking. Fidgeting. Shivering. Once in a while he could hear faint sounds of other people being around, but no one close by. No Mozzie. No talking. No cars.

Suddenly Neal heard the sound of the bolt on the door being released. He jumped off the chair and turned around, ready to face whoever was entering. Even if that someone would appear to be James.

But it wasn't. In the dim light from the hallway Neal recognized the man from the park. He didn't enter, though.

*"Why aren't you wanted by the FBI or the police? You cut your anklet almost 4 hours ago, and not even a BOLO has been sent out!"*, the man said while leaning against the door frame.

*"Maybe you just didn't hear about it?"*, Neal said in an even voice.

*"Oh, we would've heard"*, the man firmly stated.

*"Maybe they don't believe that I ran?"*, Neal suggested then.

The man cocked his head a bit and glared at him: *"You're a criminal, breaking the rules, skipping your anklet, alarming the feds right away, and they don't think you ran?"*

Why did everyone primarily see him as a criminal? The words stung a bit, and Neal didn't know why, because he was. He was a criminal. Even lately he had committed about a

dozen of crimes and yet he felt that he was more than just a criminal. Deep down inside at least. And that was the problem. He rarely let anyone that deep inside, hence they wouldn't know who he really was. Who he wanted to be. Mozzie knew, but wouldn't accept it. Peter and Elizabeth knew, too... Well... they *believed* he wanted to be more than a criminal... at one point anyway. He hoped that maybe someday they would believe in him again. Believe and forgive the crimes he had committed. If they ever found out of course.

*"I asked you a question!"*, the man said in a harsh voice as he walked closer.

Neal tried to keep the chair between them as a safety barrier, even though he couldn't see the taser anywhere.

*"And you better answer me!"*. The man pointed to the chair and added. *"Sit!"*

Neal shook his head, took an extra step backwards and said:

*"I don't know if they think I ran or not, but I didn't cut my anklet. I didn't run! You abducted me. Maybe they know that. Maybe they have proof of that and they already know who you are. Where we are!"*.

*"They don't"*, the man stated and commanded once again: *"Sit!"*.

Neal didn't.

*"T!"*, the man suddenly yelled, taking Neal by surprise, and within a few seconds "The Hulk" - or T, apparently, Neal thought - was at the door.

---

## CHAPTER 7

Neal kind of knew that he should've just placed his butt in the chair when he was told to do so, but he was never one to follow orders easily or without questioning why. Usually he would just smile and everything would be okay after all, but he doubted that smiling to T would do much of a difference.

*"We need to teach him how to behave and follow orders!"*, the man said to T while shaking his head a bit and pointing in the general direction of Neal.

Neal was right. A smile didn't make a difference. There was nowhere to go either, and soon he felt T take a tight grip on his right arm and push him into the chair hard enough that Neal almost bounced off again. Damn, that guy was strong!

*"Arh, come on - easy now!"*, Neal tried, but all that happened was that T held him tight around the chest with one arm, gripped his hair with his left hand and hissed into Neal's ear:

*"Sit! Shut up! Listen! And speak only when you're asked a question. It's as simple as that. Understood?"*, he said and pulled Neal's head roughly backwards. Neal winced and was sure he was about to lose a handful of hair.

*"Understood?"*, T repeated and held Neal even tighter.

*“Yes! Yes I got it!”*, Neal said trying to push his head into the other man's hand to release the pressure on his scalp. He kept his eyes closed, because he was pretty sure that if he opened them they'd appear watery and he definitely didn't want that. T loosened his grip a bit, but he still kept a firm hand in Neal's hair. Neal breathed a little deeper.

*“Look at me, Neal!”*, the man from the park said and Neal clearly felt his presence close by. He opened his eyes and blinked a few times to clear his vision. Then he stared directly at the man in front of him, but he kept quiet.

*“I'm gonna ask you again... Why aren't you wanted by neither the FBI nor the police, and why wouldn't they think that you ran when the alarm of your little jewelry went off?”*

*“Look, I seriously don't know”*, Neal said trying to sound as convincing as possible.

*“Make a guess then! Use that apparently smart brain of yours and tell me what you think”*, the man said tapping his index finger on Neal's forehead. Pretty much in the same way Peter had done back in the days when he told Neal the story about Jimmy Burger.

*“I think your boots are ugly, and I'm smarter than Jimmy Burger”*, Neal said with a smile.

That earned Neal a slap to his cheek.

*“Ow...”*, he said in an even voice, then added: *“Guess that wasn't what you thought, I was thinking.”*

T tightened his grip on Neal again, and the man in front of him sighed heavily, placed his hands on his hips and walked a few steps away, before he returned to Neal.

*“Let's try something else”*, he said. *“Who exactly receives the alarm when your anklet is cut?”*.

*“The Marshal's Office and my handler”*, Neal answered a little short of breath. He felt his chest and especially his arms and hands being squeezed between the chair and the pressure from T's arm.

*“Well now, see... You DO know how to answer questions without being annoying. I think you're learning after all”*, the man smiled at him. He continued:

*“What happens when the Marshal's get the alarm?”*

*“I don't know... exactly”*, Neal said still keeping eye contact with the man.

He was trying to memorize every single detail of the guy's face despite the lack of light when a thought struck him. None of their captors had ever bothered about hiding their faces! That wasn't good. That either meant that they felt secure that no one would ever find out what they had done... or... Neal gulped. They intended to kill both him and Mozzie when they were no longer of any use for these guys.

*“What happens when your handler gets the alarm?”*, the man asked.

*“He gets frustrated!”*, Neal said without hesitation.

The man in front of him cocked his head and cleared his throat.

*“You really wanna go down that road again, Neal?”*, he said.

Neal shrugged the best he could in his present position. *“Actually, I'd rather go back the road we drove on when we first arrived here...”*

That earned Neal another slap to his cheek.

*“Ow! What's with all the slapping??”*, he asked in a slightly raised voice. He felt the heat in his cheek.

*“That's what happens to boys who don't listen”*, T said from behind him.

*“I listen!”*, Neal argued, *“and I even reply... somewhat... honestly when you ask questions. It's not my fault you don't like the answers!”*

*“Maybe you just need to cool down for a bit. Your cheeks look a little red”*, the man said and placed his right hand gently on Neal's burning cheek. *“You do feel a little hot, too”*.

He signaled to Neal to get up, and T released his grip.

*“Come on!”*, T said and took hold of Neal's arm.

They followed the man out of the room, down the hallway and all the way out to the courtyard. It was almost dark outside, and Neal wondered how many hours had actually passed.

*“Let him go”*, the man said to T who roughly shoved Neal forwards. He stumbled and fell to his knees in the gravel. He almost face planted since he had no chance of breaking his fall with his hands still bound behind his back.

Before Neal could get back on his feet he heard the sound of water running behind him. He looked back over his shoulder while trying to get to his feet, but he froze completely, caught off guard, when ice cold water hit him square between his shoulders. Both T and the man from the parked laughed at his reaction. Neal desperately tried to get away from the water, but it hit him hard and quickly moved to his head which Neal tried to cover by pulling up his shoulders and shielding himself by turning his back to the water jet. He spat out a bit of water. The jet moved towards his legs, his feet. Cold! It was like being stabbed with icicles repeatedly, Neal thought.

*“Are you cooling down, Neal?”*, the man said with a smirk and moved around to face Neal, making the water hit him in his chest and his face.

*“Didn't I teach you to answer when being asked a question, Neal?”*, he continued.

Neal could hardly breathe. He was soaked. And cold, not the least! He coughed and

sputtered. The water jet hit his abdomen and moved downwards, but before it hit his crotch Neal fell to the ground and curled into something similar to fetal position.

*"F-fuck you!"*, he stuttered. His teeth were chattering.

The water disappeared.

*"Are you still feeling hot, Neal?"*, the man said in a menacing voice.

Neal sucked in a breath, shivering all over. A few seconds passed and the water came back, but he was too numb to truly registering where it hit him.

*"No"*, Neal said trying to keep his voice steady.

*"Have you cooled down?"*, the man continued.

*"Yes"*, Neal simply said. He didn't have the energy to do much else. He had no idea that cold water could drain one's powers this fast. Note to self: Never try winter swimming!

Suddenly Neal heard the voice of the third guy:

*"The BOLO is out! I just heard it on the scanner. They're looking for him!"*

A few seconds later the water was turned off and for a short time Neal just lay there on the ground, soaked, in a pool of dirty, cold water, trying to catch his breath. He felt the wind slide over his body. He was frozen to the bones and quite sure he'd never be able to uncurl himself again. However, that never became an issue, because two pairs of hands quickly hoisted him to his feet, practically carried him into the house and back into the room at the end of the hallway. Neal hardly noticed anything until they dropped him on the floor. The floor that previously felt cold was actually now feeling warmer than ever.

*"I'll make you a deal"*, the man from the park said. He crouched down in front of Neal.

*"I think you've learned your lesson, so I'll give you 15 minutes to dry off. Then I'll come back and if you show me you know how to behave and not act like a brat, I'll give you some pants and maybe - MAYBE"*, he stressed, *"a dry t-shirt."*

He took hold of Neal's chin and turned his head upwards so to be able to look at his face.

*"Look at me, Neal"*.

Neal did. And oh, how he wished the guy would disintegrate right then and there.

*"Do we have a deal?"*, the man asked.

Neal simply nodded, not trusting his voice to be anything but a stuttering sound.

*"Good boy"*, the man patted him gently on the head.

Then he rose to his feet, left the room and bolted the door shut. Neal closed his eyes - not that it mattered. Everything was dark anyway. Somehow it was a relief knowing that the authorities were looking for him - even if they did it, because they thought he'd run.

Damn, I'm cold, Neal thought. Fucking cold! His entire body was shivering. He still didn't know what this was all about, but he knew that he had to brace himself and start thinking before he spoke - or didn't speak. At least until James showed up. That son of a bitch hadn't even shown his face yet. The least he could do was to handle his dirty work himself. Neal would tell him that for sure!

How long time was 15 minutes? God, I'm cold. Peter, please find me. You always find me. Oh, Mozzie... You need to find Mozzie, too. Bring a coat, will ya? I should've kicked that man right in his private parts. Who is he really? Where is James? Peter, please find me. Neal's thoughts were flowing in all directions and then he drifted off.

---

Peter had spent almost 20 minutes discussing the various ways of continuing the search for Neal. The Marshal's didn't know about Mozzie at all. Peter had decided not to tell them that their apparent fugitive's best friend was also missing, because that would surely ignite the argumentation from the Marshal's.

They finally agreed on sending out a BOLO and involving Missing Persons Division, but not go out in public and list Neal as wanted. Peter had managed to convince the Marshal's that if Neal was really on the run a public announcement would probably send him deep under ground and they would have a harder time finding him. And in the case that something else had happened, and Neal hadn't disappeared on his own terms, it would still enhance their options if any kidnappers didn't know that they were looking for Neal intensively.

Except from that, their next moves were to check the passenger lists of all outgoing flights for any suspicious names, send teams to various locations of Neal's interest - including Rachel Turner's apartment - and find out if Neal had made any interesting phone calls lately.

A technician knocked on the door to the conference room.

*"We have voice mails from the broken phone!"*, he said and sat down a laptop on the table. *"And here is the list of incoming and outgoing phone calls"*, he added.

Peter started looking through the list of phone numbers. The list he had wanted so badly, but hadn't had time to look at since the Marshals arrived. Meanwhile the technician played the first message. Peter's jaw almost dropped to the floor when he heard the sound of his wife's voice. The next message was also from El. The third was from June...

*"That's Mozzie's phone!"*, Peter exclaimed.

*"Who's this... Mozzie?"*, one of the Marshals asked.

*"Moz... Mr. Haversham"*, Peter corrected himself, *"is Caffrey's friend"*.

Diana looked at Peter with worry all over her face.

*"He would never crush his phone and dump it like that!"*, she said.

*"No! No he wouldn't..."*, Peter agreed.

*“How do you know - and why is that important?”*, the other Marshal asked.

*“Because...”*, Peter didn't really know how to explain. *“He's very... protective... of his belongings, and especially his phone. This is not good. Something happened!”*

Peter spent the next 10 minutes on convincing the Marshal's that Neal would never hurt Mozzie and that Mozzie would never trash his phone in a way that it could easily be found so this could only point in one direction. Someone else had smashed it and made sure that Mozzie wasn't able to pick up the pieces and get rid of them properly.

The debate between Peter and the Marshal's was interrupted by Peter's phone. It was Jones. They had found the guy who both owned and had been the one driving the truck. He claimed to not know of anything regarding Neal - or Mozzie for that matter - but they had still detained him.

*“We found Neal's anklet, Peter”*, Jones said. *“In three pieces - definitely cut - and... You're not gonna like this, but... I think there's a tiny bit of blood on it.”*

*“Blood?”*, Peter repeated.

*“Not much, Peter, and I'm not even sure it's blood. I'll have it examined. But...”*, Jones hesitated.

*“Yes?”*, Peter inquired.

*“Neal wouldn't cut his anklet like that. He'd have acquired a key somehow. Would've done something fancy. And he would most definitely do it in a way that wouldn't draw blood!”*, Jones said in a very convincing way.

*“I know”*, Peter said. *“And I agree... This is bad. Really bad! Get back here right away, Jones.”*

They were going somewhere now - but it was absolutely not in any direction, Peter would ever have wanted this to go. However, they didn't have enough leads to point them in the exact direction. They weren't completely blank here, but they sure didn't have much to move on. At least now Peter knew one thing for sure: He needed to find Neal, and he needed to do it ASAP!

---

## CHAPTER 8

Mozzie was sweating. It was a job a lot harder than expected to get rid of his bonds. He suspected that the crooks had indeed done a bit of research about the capabilities of their captives, and that he and Neal still managed to get free - well, partly anyway - in the car must have made them even more conscious about how to keep him immobilized.

So far the only thing Mozzie had actually succeeded in was bringing the chair a little bit closer to the shelves. He had done that by rocking as much back and forth as possible, which wasn't a lot considering the way the duct tape was tightened around his chest, feet and arms. He had no idea on how long time he had spent working on his bonds so far, but he needed a break and to be honest he could really need a drink of water, too.



Guess that wasn't around the corner.

Mozzie was listening to the silence. Even when straining his ears, he couldn't hear much going on. After a while he heard some talking close by. Not loud in any way, but he got the feeling that it was someone talking to Neal across the hallway. Then he heard one man yelling for tea or something... But who would want tea that desperately that he'd need to yell for it?? Oh, Mozzie thought a few seconds later. They weren't asking for something to drink...

He still couldn't hear all details of the conversation going on, but he decided that now was a good time to start sending positive vibes in Neal's direction and silently pleading him not to do anything rash.

---

Back on the 21<sup>st</sup> floor of the FBI building the office was buzzing with busy agents all focusing on various tasks. Now that they were almost 100% positive that something had happened to Neal, as well as Mozzie, neither Peter nor any of the others had any reasons to tread carefully. They all knew what to do.

Jones had arrived a few minutes ago, and he and Peter were now interrogating the owner of the truck while Diana was on the phone desperately trying to make the lab work faster to confirm that the tiny spot of blood on the anklet piece was actually Neal's.

A couple of other agents were looking through more surveillance footage, and they had noticed another car, a dark van, which they really wanted to track down, but unfortunately the license plate was impossible to read. They needed more details about the van before they could ask the NYPD to look for it. Too many dark vans were a part of the New York City traffic, so unless they found some more information it would be like looking for a needle in a haystack.

In the interrogation room Peter and Jones didn't make much progress. The owner really seemed to not know anything about the anklet pieces found on the flatbed of the truck. He hadn't seen any people near his truck at any time, and Peter realized that he couldn't hold the man any longer. Besides... there wasn't any point in doing so anyway. He gave him his card and asked the guy to call him right away if anything that could help came to mind, even if he thought it wasn't important.

Peter had been more than busy the last hour or so, but since he had time for a small break now, he felt that he needed to call Elizabeth and let her in on what was going on. He also needed to ask her if she knew of any locations connected to Mozzie.

Naturally Elizabeth was anxious to hear from her husband, but the news Peter had did nothing to calm her down - on the contrary. Even though Neal had caused a lot of disturbance in their lives lately, she finished off the conversation by saying:

*"You'll find him, Peter, I know you will! You'll find both of them. And if they're together, you and I both know that they make a great team, right?"*

*"They do, honey, and you're right. I will find them. We just need to figure out what might have happened. We're working on different theories, but I'll get back to you later. I have to go now",* Peter said to his wife.

“Love you”, El said.

“Love you, too, hon”, Peter said, trying to sound as optimistic as possible even though Elizabeth hadn't been able to add any possible locations to their list of places to search for leads.

In his mind he started going through the list of possible suspects, a list that he knew his agents were already working on. Neal had a history unlike many others and that made up for a long list of suspects, though some seemed less possible than others: Matthew Keller, Rachel Turner, any possible partners of Curtis Hagen that they didn't know of, James Bennet, Dobbs, Kramer? No... it couldn't be Kramer. He wouldn't go down that road. But still Peter wanted to put him on the list - at least on his own.

And all these people were only those that Peter and the FBI knew of. Since Mozzie was also missing they might not even be anywhere close to figuring out who the culprits were. He knew even less about Mozzie's background than he did about Neal's.

He sat back in his chair and looked out over the bullpen. Where are you, Neal?

---

Neal woke when he heard the lock on the door open and the lights were turned on. He blinked a few times trying to adjust to the sudden flood of light. The fifteen minutes had felt like an eternity and a split second all at the same time. He was still curled up on the floor, shivering, wet and cold and he didn't move until he saw a pair of well-known boots entering his field of vision. Then he turned his head a bit and looked away.

“So Neal...”, the man squatted in front of him, placed his hand on Neal's head, stroked it gently and then moved on to rest his hand on his upper left arm. “*You don't seem too hot anymore. How are you feeling?*”

Neal glared at him. In his mind he wanted to ask the man, how he would feel about being thrown into a freezing cold river after being kicked in the balls, but instead he gathered all his will-power to speak without his teeth chattering audibly.

“Cold...”, he said.

“*You remember our deal?*”, the man asked him.

“Yes...”, Neal said in as steady a voice as possible.

“*Good!*”, the man said and stood up.

He threw a towel on the floor in front of Neal and continued:

“*Get up, sweep the floor - you've made it all wet - and then sit down.*” He pointed to the chair behind him.

Neal's brain sent messages to his limbs, but they acted a lot slower than usual and apparently a bit too slow for the man's patience.

“*Now!*”, he said and started pulling Neal up by his hair.

Neal fought to get his shivering body to work properly, first onto his knees and then onto his feet. He was stiff and everything was aching. Except maybe from his hands. He couldn't really feel them at all which was no where reassuring, Neal thought. When he was almost upright, the man let go of him, and he started sweeping the floor with the towel using his feet. He noted the small cut on his left ankle. Obviously it had been bleeding a little, but whatever they had wrapped around his ankle earlier had done its trick and it was already healing.

*"Hurry up"*, the man urged.

Neal decided to take the chance and ask a question.

*"Could you loosen the ties a bit? My hands are numb"*, he said in a casual way, keeping his eyes focused on the floor and what he was doing.

*"Excuse me?!"*, the man said in a slightly surprised voice.

*"I said: Could you lo..."*, Neal begun, but he was cut off.

*"I heard what you said, Neal!"*, the man said and folded his arms across the chest. *"Did I give you permission to speak? Did I ask you a question?"*

Neal had finished cleaning dirt and water off the floor and he turned his gaze upwards and locked eyes with the man staring at him with a frown.

*"No!"*, Neal stated clearly.

*"Sit!"*, the man said and moved to the side, turning a bit to keep Neal in front of him.

Neal did. He kept eye contact as long as possible, and he didn't feel comfortable when he finally had to sit down facing away from the man. He still felt cold wearing the wet t-shirt, but he was starting to feel more in control of his movements and his speech again. Maybe moving around for a bit hadn't been that bad.

*"You've done good, Neal"*, the man said placing his hand on Neal's right shoulder while moving in front of him again. *"I'll give you a choice, despite your little mishap on speaking without permission"*.

Neal rolled his eyes and sighed.

*"I can loosen the ties on your hands a bit, but I'll strap you to the chair"*, the man said with a smirk, *"or I can give you some pants and let you move around the room to get warm. What do you choose?"*

Neal thought about it. It wasn't an easy choice. He really felt cold and vulnerable - he hated to admit that, even to himself - without pants, and it would be nice to move around and get warmer.

On the other hand he was cautious about his hands. They were his tools, and he would definitely need them to escape. But being strapped down, unable to move, and still being cold and wet would do no good for him in the long run, especially not if he wanted

to enhance his chances of escaping.

*“What do you say, Neal?”*, the man grinned.

Neal swallowed.

*“Will I get a dry t-shirt?”*, he asked looking directly at his captor.

*“Then you shouldn't have spoken without permission”*, the man said shaking his head.

Neal tried wriggling his hands and fingers as he had done many times before during the last - how many? - hours. Not much movement there. At the same time he felt a shudder and Neal took a deep breath.

*“Pants”*, he said. *“I want pants.”*

Without a word the man walked to the door. Neal looked over the shoulder to follow his movements and saw him bend down, pick up something left outside the door, and then walk back towards Neal. He threw a pair of sweatpants in Neal's lap and stood back crossing his arms.

Neal looked at the pants and then questioningly at the man.

*“What?”*, the man grumbled.

*“How am I supposed to put'em on without my hands?”*, Neal said moving his arms a bit indicating that they were still not just kind of stuck, but very well stuck, behind his back.

*“Not my problem”*, the man said with a cocky smile. *“You chose pants! But don't worry, you're in no hurry. It'll be another hour or two until your father is here.”*

*“Don't. Call. Him that”*, Neal hissed through gritted teeth locking gaze with the man.

*“Uuuh, touchy subject, I take it”*, the guy said looking back at Neal, a broader smile forming on his lips.

Neal kept his posture still. Didn't even move his gaze away, and he didn't care about speaking without permission when he very clearly stated:

*“James is NOT my father!”*

*“You don't like him now, I see”*, the man said and added: *“Then wait until you find out what he's done!”*

He moved towards the door. *“Put your pants on! I'll leave the lights on for 2 minutes.”*

Neal heard the door lock behind him. He stood up from the chair and let the pants fall to the floor. He almost felt like kicking them the hell out of his way, but he took a couple of deep breaths instead to calm himself down. It didn't help much, but a few seconds later he crouched down anyway trying to find a way to hold the pants still while each foot found its way through the respective pant leg. It wasn't easy, and he was

scrambling around on the floor, probably looking incredibly ridiculous snaking his way into the pants, but there was no fucking way he was gonna face James wearing only his boxers and a t-shirt.

All the moving around combined with the anger boiling in Neal helped him getting warmer, but the wet t-shirt was still cool to his skin when he finally stood up. The lights went out, but in the darkness he still managed to pull up the pants the rest of the way with the help of the chair and his practically numb hands. Neal panted and sat back down on the chair for a bit catching his breath.

The darkness that had once again surrounded him actually felt comforting this time. At least now he was sure that no one could see him. He bend his head forward, swallowed hard. His eyes felt watery, and he couldn't help it when a single treacherous tear fell down his cheek. He dreaded whatever James had planned, and he hated the man. He hated him from the bottom of his heart. For ruining his relationship with Peter, for putting the FBI Agent, and not least Elizabeth, through hell, for being such a coward and for not being the father Neal had hoped for. Why Neal had ever wanted the man to be a part of his life was the biggest question in Neal's head right now. James did nothing but ruin everything, from Neal was just a kid more than 30 years ago and to this very moment when he once again - without even being present - managed to ruin Neal's composure.

---

## CHAPTER 9

Peter looked at his watch: 7:48 PM, and it had been about 5 hours since the anklet alarm went off. The FBI had reached something like a stand still. No new leads had turned up. They hadn't been able to find out more about the dark van from the surveillance footage. Peter looked over his notes. In fact they hadn't even been able to confirm for real that Neal - and most possibly also Mozzie - had been kidnapped, but the cut anklet and the blood indicated that something had happened. Peter felt the hair rise on his body when thinking of the blood. The lab had confirmed that it was Neal's. The only good thing was that the amount of blood had been very limited. He hoped that it meant that Neal wasn't seriously hurt.

At the moment they were working on a theory that someone who needed the skills of both Neal and Mozzie had abducted both of them: Neal from the park and Mozzie from close by. Whoever took them must have known about Neal's deal with the FBI and they seemed very professional leaving pretty much no clues.

Peter was anxious. He wanted to do a lot more than he was capable of right now. He watched his agents in the bullpen - everyone was still working hard on finding their missing C.I. He noticed, however, that the energy seemed to have slowed down in most of them. Waiting often did that. And right now they were waiting. Waiting to see if the BOLO - which now included Mozzie - brought up anything.

Missing Persons had suggested that if they hadn't found any good leads or heard from any kidnapers in the morning they should probably go for a public announcement listing Neal and Mozzie as "missing persons". The biggest problem was that they had no pictures of Mozzie, and even if Peter suspected that he was somehow connected to - if not - Teddy Winters, he had nothing but Neal's drawing from the case, and that drawing was most definitely not Mozzie. Peter would have to sit with a sketch artist instead, he

thought. He would have felt much more secure just asking Neal to draw a portrait of Mozzie, but... well, that was kind of impossible in the situation.

Peter left his office and for a moment he just stood there looking out over the bullpen. He cleared his throat:

*“Listen up, everybody. It's getting late... Does anyone have anything new to work on? Do we have some actual leads to go by for the moment?”*

Most agents shrugged or shook their heads. Not the uplifting reactions he had hoped for.

“Jones?”, he asked and looked his colleague hopefully in the eyes.

“Sorry, Peter”, Jones said regretfully.

“Okay”, Peter took a deep breath. *“Let's call it a day. The NYPD is on the lookout, but I want you all to be prepared to get back here right away if important information pops up during the night. Otherwise, go home. Get some sleep, and we'll find Caffrey in the morning. Missing Persons are working over night on the rest of the surveillance and preparing for a public announcement tomorrow.”*

It was a tough decision to make, but he couldn't keep his people working 24/7. Rested agents were better agents. Peter knew that, even if it was hard to let go as long as he knew that Neal and Mozzie were out there and maybe in danger.

The agents took their boss' advice and silently left one after the other. Jones came up the stairs before leaving.

“Are you gonna follow your own advice, Peter?”, he asked. “We can't do much more today, we have no leads...”

“I know, Jones, and yes... I'm gonna take my own advice. I need to go talk to El anyway. She's worried, too”, Peter said. He continued:

*“What bothers me the most is that we have NO idea who's behind this. The list of possible suspects is huge - and we still can't even rule out that Neal did this himself”.*

Jones looked at Peter, tilted his head a bit to the side and asked:

“Do you really believe that, Peter?”

Peter turned around, rubbed his hand across his face and said in a voice filled with despair:

*“No! No, I don't... My gut tells me that this is bad. I think, I knew from the moment the alarm went off, but I was confused by the possibility that Neal had ran off. You know, Jones... He asked me for his freedom. I wanted to give it to him. I practically promised him it would happen, but the higher-ups turned him down. Too big an asset for the bureau. I told Neal about it and he left in anger - just a few hours before the alarm went off.”*

Jones was listening carefully to Peter's words. He could clearly see that the agent had

been affected by all this. More than he would probably admit.

*“But I don't think he was as angry, as he was hurt... And then this happened. At the worst time possible. If I hadn't had that conversation with Neal today, I wouldn't have doubted a second that something had happened. But I did. And maybe I wanted Neal to have run off”, Peter continued.*

Jones was about to say something, but Peter stopped him by holding up his hand.

*“Don't! Don't say anything, Jones. It clouded my judgement and maybe we lost important time by me not...”*

This time Jones cut in anyway.

*“Listen Peter. It doesn't matter now. What's important is that we are working full force on finding them, and if we don't have any leads now, we wouldn't have had any leads earlier either”, Jones said and put a reassuring hand on his boss' shoulder.*

The two agents talked a little more about what could have happened, about their next moves, about the tasks for tomorrow, but without reaching any further conclusions. They broke up, left the office and went home, both of them hoping deeply that Neal and Mozzie would be all right. Jones, however, also wondered how two criminals had managed to sneak their way into his life in a way that made him worry about their safety.

---

It had been a while since Mozzie last heard any sounds from the hallway. Meanwhile he had once again started wriggling every part of his body, pulling as much as possible on his bonds and he was now sweating all over. Again! However, it appeared to be helpful, because Mozzie had a feeling that he had more room for movement now than earlier. He did have one problem, though. To get free he'd need to get off this damn chair. He looked around, trying to figure out what to do. He tried stretching his legs and leaning backwards to see if he could pull the duct tape free from the back of the chair.

Suddenly Mozzie felt the ground disappearing below him, and the chair - and he - tumbled over, landing on the left side. Ouch! For a second Mozzie froze completely, listening carefully to make sure that no one had heard the noise and would be joining him in a moment. Nothing happened! Mozzie let out the breath he'd been holding. He scrambled trying to turn enough around to free the left arm which was now halfway pinned beneath him and the chair, and he realized that part of the chair was now a bit wobbly. It partly broke in the fall, he thought - make use of the weakness!

Bingo! The duct tape on the right leg was giving in and a couple of minutes later Mozzie was able to free his leg, and by scratching with his foot on the duct tape and the pants on the left leg, it didn't take long until both were released of their ties.

See now, progress. Mozzie cheered inside. He snaked his way upwards, and slowly - inch by inch - the duct tape was reaching the end of the back of the chair. Mozzie used his feet for leverage pushing the chair away and finally - finally! - he was no longer stuck to the awfully uncomfortable chair.

Okay, time-out! Mozzie was panting. He was so out of shape that struggling like this

made his pulse speed up, and he was only halfway. His hands were still tied together behind his back, and duct tape was still hugging his chest and arms like a snake curling around its prey.

Mozzie sat up. He had no idea how much time had passed, but he had a feeling - according to his growling stomach and slowly rising pressure on his bladder - that several hours had passed by now. Anyway, it was time to move on and get rid of the rest of the bonds.

He got to his feet and went for the hook on the shelf. He could use that for cutting... Well... if he could reach it, that was. Mozzie stood on his toes, stretching as far up as possible, but he was still quite far from reaching the hook. He tried rubbing up and down the edge of the shelf instead, hoping to find some kind of semi-sharp edge that could cut the tape. No luck. Mozzie was swearing inside. Stupid, annoying, crappy duct tape. He had come so far, and yet he still had a long way to go.

Mozzie was just about to kick the chair far away when he heard talking in the hallway. Shoot! Please don't come in, please don't come in, he pleaded in his head.

---

Neal had let the darkness comfort him for a bit, but then he breathed deep and stood. With the help of his shoulder he dried away the wetness on his cheek and he slowly started walking around in the darkness counting the steps from one wall to another, trying to get warmer. He wished he could get out of the wet t-shirt.

After a while Neal started feeling warmer, but he kept pacing the room, back and forth, back and forth. At one point he heard a thud that made him stop and strain his ears, but nothing more happened, so he kept on walking around.

The t-shirt wasn't as cold and damp anymore which told him that quite some time had passed. He wondered how Mozzie was doing. He hadn't seen or heard him for hours. Neal was tired, hungry - and wouldn't mind visiting a restroom sometime soon - and when he reached the wall again, he let himself slip down to the floor, resting his head on the wall behind him.

He smiled to himself. If he could get his hands free, he'd relieve himself by the door, pound on it until someone came in and stepped in his piss and then he'd make a run for it. If he didn't succeed at least he would have the joy of having annoyed the shit out of his captors. He started wriggling his hands and fingers again. How could they hurt when they felt numb at the same time? His shoulders were aching, too, and Neal wondered how many hours it had been since he had been able to truly move his arms. He should've enjoyed the moment of "freedom" a little more when they'd asked ... no commanded... him to strip. Right now he'd happily accept such a brief moment of free movement, just to soften the tension in his shoulders.

Then he heard talking in the hallway and the door opened at the same time the room was flooded in light. Neal partly closed his eyes to let them adjust to the light, but otherwise didn't move.

"Hi Neal!", a familiar voice said.

Neal could swear that he felt venom in the way his name was pronounced.



*“What do you want... James?”*, he stressed the name, then he opened his eyes and turned his head towards the man who was his father by blood, but would never ever be family by heart.

*“How's Agent Burke?”*, James asked.

He stepped into the room followed by T and the fancy boots man from the park.

*“Fine! Not thanks to you”*, Neal said and followed the men's movements closely.

T grabbed Neal's arm, hauled him to his feet and steered him towards the chair. He sat down, not so much by choice as by force.

*“What do you want from me?”*, Neal asked again when James walked around to face him.

*“What I want?”*, James raised his eyebrows and looked at Neal. *“I gave you an advice about not taking the fall. I didn't want to do this, son, but you gave me no choice.”*

Neal quickly stood, took a step and actually managed to push James a little backwards with the simple use of his body, and he faced the man directly, close enough that he could smell his breath. T grabbed the neck of his t-shirt and his upper right arm to drag him away from James.

*“I am NOT your son!”*, Neal almost spat the words out and continued in an angry voice:

*“Let go of me!”*

He pulled free of T's hold.

James was obviously taken by surprise by Neal's anger and sudden aggressive movements. He stepped back a little further. Neal stepped away himself, shooting daggers at T, daring him to touch him again. For a few seconds no one said anything and no one moved.

James held up a hand, signaling to his men to hold back. Then he looked at Neal.

*“You and Mozzie didn't make it easy for me, Neal. If you had just let Peter take the fall it would never have come this far, and you could have moved on with your life.”*

*“I'd never let an innocent man take the blame, and neither should you! I didn't make it easy for you? Such BS!”*, Neal said trying to keep his voice steady, but he couldn't hide the anger.

*“Do you realize how much trouble you caused? What I've had to go through, because you left? Because you were too much of a coward to stand up? What Peter went through? And Elizabeth?”*

Neal let out all the steam that had been building inside him ever since the moment James walked out his door several months ago.

James shook his head: *"It was YOUR choice to throw yourself into that mess. You could've turned your back, Neal!"*

He continued: *"I know about the fake confession. And that put me back on the wanted list. YOU put me back on the list! But I told you, Neal, I'm not gonna take the fall. I can't prove the confession is false."*

*"Why are you even still here?"*, Neal interrupted.

*"It's quite simple, actually"*, James said. *"I couldn't get away. I guess you - or maybe even more your little friend - still have a lot of power among forgers in New York. I couldn't get a new ID."*

James paused, cocked his head and smiled at Neal: *"But I'm getting one now."*

Neal huffed: *"If you think I'm gonna make you a fake ID or passport or whatever you're sadly mistaken, because I'm NOT!"*

James laughed.

*"My boy... I know you're talented, but there are other people who can get me what I want.... For the right payment!"*

*"So... why do you need me?!"*, Neal said a little puzzled.

*"Payment!"*, James dryly stated.

Then he signaled to his men who both stepped into action going for Neal. But Neal didn't give in that easy when it dawned on him what his father meant.

*"You're not gonna get away with this, you son of a bitch!"*, he shouted at James while quickly moving to the other side of the room, ready to fight with all his might.

*"Don't do this, Neal!"*, James simply said, shaking his head a little and following his son's movements around the room.

The two men came closer to Neal reaching out to grab him, but he kicked out and quickly moved away. They tried to corner him, but the adrenaline was pumping in Neal and he kicked at the men again. This time he actually hit the man from the park in his shin. Neal rejoiced when the guy yelled from pain and limped a few steps backwards. Neal turned around and sprinted for the door, but the man recovered quickly, and T was faster than one should think considering his was heavy built and within seconds he tackled Neal from behind. They fell to the ground, and Neal struggled and wriggled to get out of the other man's grip. But his fight was fruitless. When Neal felt a powerful hand pull his arms upwards away from his back, he couldn't do anything but get on his knees and bend over to release the pressure on his shoulders. T pulled further, and Neal screamed, sure that his shoulders would pop their sockets anytime.

*"Stop!"*, James commanded. *"Don't hurt him!"*

The pressure was released a bit, and for a moment Neal actually felt relieved that James really didn't want to hurt him badly.

James squatted in front of Neal who was panting and trying to catch his breath.

*“His value drops, if you break any bones”, James said and patted Neal’s cheek. “And I promised them an exquisite product.”*

He then kind of inspected Neal. First checking the cut on the ankle, apparently being satisfied with the minimal damage from cutting the anklet, then his hands and his fingers carefully.

*“We should probably restrain him in another way - looks like the blood flow to the fingers isn’t the best. Tie his hands a little looser and then strap him to the chair”, James said to his men.*

*“Behave, Neal, and we’ll both have a new life soon!”*, he said with a smirk and continued: *“Isn’t that what you’ve been dreaming of anyway.. son?”*

James left the room, and the two men manhandled Neal to the chair. He felt the zip ties on his hands being cut, but before he had time to take advantage of them being free, they were quickly re-tied, though not as tight as before. Other zip ties were wrapped around his elbows and strapped to the chair.

The man from the park tied Neal’s legs to the chair and then gave him a long speech about how exciting his future would be, how his father had spent weeks on planning this, and about how unacceptable behavior shouldn’t ruin a great man’s life, because James was a great man. He had killed a corrupt senator, he had made great money back in the days, and he would do that again.

The guy finished off by saying that he never let anyone get away with hitting - or kicking - him, and despite his father’s wish about not hurting Neal, he just couldn’t help it. Then he hit Neal hard across the jaw. Neal’s lip split and he tasted blood.

The men left. Neal never said a word, but inside he swore to himself that he wouldn’t make it easy for James. No matter the cost.

---

## CHAPTER 10

Mozzie had silently been listening to the commotion going on across the hall. Though he hadn’t been able to hear everything going on, he did recognize the voice of James and hear parts of Neal’s angry words. He understood. He promised Neal - and as a matter of fact Elizabeth, too - that they would get out of here and they would bring James with them back to the FBI. Never before had Mozzie felt the desire to actually turn up at the FBI’s offices on his own behalf, but he would if it meant that James would be going down. Going down for all the trouble he had caused Neal, the Suit and not least Mrs. Suit. Yes, Mozzie decided, they would bring him in. They had been looking for James all over the city, they just hadn’t expected to find him this way, but they would work with what they had. They had done more with less, Mozzie was quite sure about that.

He looked around the tiny room for a bit and noticed the bucket in the corner. An old fashioned metal bucket? Oh, that could be useful. With the help of his feet, Mozzie managed to turn the bucket upside down and place it in front of the shelves. He climbed

on top of it, balancing carefully, and he could finally reach the hook. It took him a few minutes, though, to cut through the duct tape and at one point he thought for a second that he was actually stuck to the hook. Mozzie stepped down onto the floor again and shook off the tape itself by making it stick to the nearest shelf.

Next step was the hands. Mozzie smiled behind the tape on his mouth. Oh, I'm getting there, piece of cake by now. He sat down and after a bit of scrambling around he managed to pull his legs through his bound arms, and he felt quite relieved when they were finally in front of him. It also felt kind of nice to move his shoulders again, Mozzie realized, when he moved his hands up to reach the hook and cut through the tape. It didn't take long, and Mozzie celebrated the first step towards freedom by ripping off the tape from his mouth. Ouch, that actually hurt! Who ever said it hurt less if you pulled it off quickly must have been lying.

Mozzie rolled his shoulders a bit, lifted his hands in the air and stretched. He needed to get rid of all the kinks and tension before moving on. He really had no idea on how many hours had passed since they had been abducted, but every minute that went on was one minute too many.

After a few moments, Mozzie started investigating the door and not least the lock. He would have loved to have Neal's lock pick skills right now, but he wasn't too bad himself, so he could do it. First step, first: Finding a pick! Mozzie started pulling at the nail on the back of the door. It didn't move at all, his fingers only kept sliding off every time he tried to get at hold on it. How about the hook then? No, it was too thick. He needed some kind of tool to pull out the nail. Mozzie looked around. Paper, shelves, broom, bucket, duster - he patted himself down - buttons, clothes... Clothes? Hmm... wait a minute. Mozzie took off his shirt and without hesitation he ripped apart one of the sleeves. Considering for a moment just to leave the rest of the shirt on the floor, he looked down himself. No! No way would he walk around wearing just a white undershirt. He'd be looking like John McClane fighting terrorists in Die Hard, and Mozzie had already done that once before when he and Neal broke into the Howser Clinic - not fighting terrorists of course, but looking like John McClane - and in Mozzie's humble opinion that was enough of Bruce Willis imitations. Quickly, Mozzie put on what was left of his shirt. Definitely better than the alternative!

He carefully wrapped the piece of cloth around his hand, thumb and index finger and got back to working on the nail. A tight grip and Mozzie started pulling, wiggling and pulling some more. Still, it didn't feel like the nail wanted to give in, and after minutes of unsuccessful work, Mozzie threw away the cloth and cursed the nail.

Mozzie was so close and yet so far away! He sat down against the wall resting his arms on his knees. There were no windows in the tiny room, so his only way out was the door. He could of course just bang it, scream and yell until someone opened it and then make a run for it, but how clever would that be?

Now that he sat down, he was reminded that his bladder needed to be taken care of as well. Mozzie sighed. How could their captors even expect him to just stay put in here for this long? Why hadn't they checked on him? Was he really that unimportant? Then they weren't professionals for sure. Mozzie smiled to himself. Yeah. Let them just forget about me and I'll take them by surprise, he thought. But first.. nature's calling!

He actually didn't feel comfortable doing so, but he convinced himself that he had no

choice, and in the end Mozzie relived himself into the bucket in the corner of the room after having - unconsciously - looked over his shoulder to check that no one was watching.

Suddenly Mozzie felt exhausted. He hadn't had anything to eat or drink for hours and his body was running on fumes. But he needed to think. He needed to figure out his next move. He sat back down, resting his head against the wall, and looked around the room without moving anything but his eyes. Maybe it would be okay if he rested for a moment. Just a moment, Mozzie thought, and before he knew of it, he drifted away.

---

Neal had spent a while trying to figure out exactly who would be the one or ones that would give James a new identity with Neal being part of the payment. He knew he had pissed off a lot of people throughout the years, but still he felt fairly certain that most of the really good forgers in and around New York knew about his and Mozzie's friendship, and Mozzie had earned great respect from most of the same people who thought of Neal as a traitor. Many of those people wouldn't dare hurt him if it meant they would feel the wrath of Mozzie.

Thinking of Mozzie made Neal a little more worried. It had been ages since he had seen or heard his friend, and he wondered how he was doing. On the other hand Neal shouldn't be worried, because Mozzie knew how to take care of himself - even in troubled times.

Neal's thoughts were interrupted when he heard someone at the door behind him. It was really annoying that the chair was facing away from the door so he couldn't feign disinterest and still take a peek at the person entering.

The door opened, and the low voice of a man who Neal didn't recognize at first sounded through the room.

*"You hungry?"*, he said.

Neal was a puzzled. Huh? That was probably the last question he had expected. He turned his head around and saw the dark silhouette of the guy who had threatened Mozzie with a knife in the van.

*"A bit"*, Neal said trying to figure out if this was some kind of trick while his stomach desperately told him that it was way more hungry than just a bit.

Without a word the guy left, locked the door behind him, and the darkness surrounded Neal again. This time, however, it only lasted a few minutes, before the lights were turned on, and the door was once again unlocked.

Neal squinted at the light, and when he managed to see what was going on, the man stood right in front of him peeling a banana. He held it out towards Neal's mouth.

*"Eat"*, he said.

For a second Neal wondered if the banana could be poisoned or filled with drugs somehow, but since he had just seen the man peel it, he decided to take the chance. He took a bite and looked at the man.

*"You know... I could hold that myself if you release one of my hands"*, Neal said with a wry smile.

*"Just eat and appreciate that I'm actually giving you something"*, the man said, once again lowering his voice.

Neal took another bite and sensed that he wasn't really supposed to be eating. The man kept casting glances towards the door. Neal figured he'd try another approach.

*"Look"*, he said, *"I really need to take a piss, too. Please take me to the bathroom."*

The man looked at Neal, definitely suspicious about his request.

*"Not gonna happen, dude"*, he said shaking his head.

*"Please"*, Neal pleaded. *"Imagine yourself not being able to go for ... I don't know how many hours it has been by now, but I really gotta go, man."*

Neal took the last bite of the banana and added with his mouth full:

*"Please!"*

Actually, Neal didn't like appearing this humble, but if it would grant him the chance of getting a break, he could do humility for a bit.

The man grumbled and started for the door.

*"Come on, it's just a bathroom break"*, Neal quickly said, before the man closed the door.

He stopped with his back at Neal, pausing for a couple of seconds, then he looked over his shoulder and asked:

*"You really need to piss?"*

*"Yes"*, Neal said, sounding almost resigned. *"A lot!"*

The man popped his head out the door and looked down the hallway, then he sighed and turned around taking out the knife from his pocket.

*"Keep quiet, and if you as much as think of running, I promise I'll cut your throat!"*, he said while cutting the ties on Neal's elbows and feet that tied him to the chair. He didn't release his hands, though, but just took a firm grip on Neal's right arm and hoisted him to his feet while holding the knife close to Neal's throat.

Okay, the guy was definitely being careful, but neither the grip nor the knife kept Neal from straining his ears and keeping a close eye on everything - especially the door behind which he suspected Mozzie was still being kept.

While Neal was led down the hallway he noticed numerous doors on each side, and at the end was an open door into a room where the lights were on. He could hear faint

noises from either a radio or - more likely - a police scanner, Neal thought. That would make sense, now that he thought back to the moment when the kidnappers had heard about the BOLO. Neal didn't get to go all the way through the hallway, before the man opened a door to the right, and he was led into a tiny restroom. He let go of Neal's arm and signaled to him to get going. Neal lifted his shoulders and wriggled his hands indicating that he'd need those to complete the mission.

The guy just shook his head, took the key from the keyhole in the door and whispered:

*"Two minutes"*

Then he left, closed the door and locked it from the outside. Neal sighed deeply. Even though his hands weren't tied as tight as earlier there was no way he'd get them free, do his business - because in all honesty he really had to - and pick the lock in two minutes. Besides... As far as Neal knew, the guy might as well stand right outside the door the entire time.

Taking a piss with your hands tied behind your back wasn't an easy task on its own, but while struggling to make it happen, Neal took his time to scout the room for any useful objects within reach, but it appeared like the restroom was only meant for guests. There was just a small window up high, it didn't have any closets, no shower, and Neal figured that a roll of toilet paper, a bar of soap and a toilet brush wouldn't work as the best escape tools.

Before he knew of it, he heard the door being unlocked. He hurriedly finished his business, and when the guy stepped into the room and grabbed his arm again, Neal silently thanked his captors for giving him sweatpants. If he had still been wearing his own pants he most likely wouldn't even have managed to get them open enough to avoid wetting himself.

Neal felt the pressure of the knife at his throat again and without resistance he was escorted back to his "cell" where he was shoved into the chair.

*"Don't. Move."*, the guy said while moving the blade of the knife to be awfully close to Neal's eye.

Neal instinctively moved his head back, and the guy pulled out new zip ties from his back pocket. Neal knew for sure he hadn't been carrying those all the time so he must have retrieved them when Neal was in the bathroom, which meant he actually hadn't been standing guard outside. Not that it mattered, anyway, since Neal never had the time to try an escape.

It didn't take long before he was securely strapped to the chair again, and when the man stood up after having tied Neal's legs to the chair, Neal dared asking another question:

*"How about my friend"*, he asked looking directly at the man in front of him.

*"What about him?"*, the guy responded seemingly uninterested in Mozzie.

Neal elaborated.

*"How is he doing? Did you give him something to eat, too?"*

The man shrugged and started to leave.

*“He hit me with the hammer!”*, he simply stated, closed and locked the door, and then the light went off.

Neal took a deep breath and leaned his head backwards. He would've loved to know how Mozzie was doing, but Neal guessed that they had been serious when their kidnappers initially stated that they didn't really need Mozzie, but just had to bring him along to stage the impression that they had run. And hopefully Mozzie's punishment for hitting the guy had simply been neglect. Then Neal straightened in the chair. Was that a knock? He listened carefully. Yup, definitely knocking and quiet talking.

---

Mozzie startled. What the heck was that? Then he recognized the sound of soft knocking on the door and he heard a low voice asking:

*“Yo shithead, you alright in there?”*

Within a second Mozzie felt the adrenaline running through his body. If that guy came in now, all his struggles, all the hours he had spent on getting free of his bonds, could turn out to be a waste of time. Mozzie quickly, yet as silent as possible, stood up, looked around and grabbed the broom for a weapon.

*“Hope you're feeling terrible, but I don't want you dead... yet”*, the voice continued and Mozzie realized it was the guy from the van.

Remembering that he was supposed to be gagged, Mozzie's only response was:

*“Mmmmm...”*

He begged to the god of criminals - if such one existed - that making some mumbling sounds would be enough to make the guy know he was alive, but not enough to cause him to enter. Still he got ready, halfway behind the door, holding the broom in a way that made him look like the cleaning guy pretending to be Darth Vader.

Nothing happened. Mozzie listened, still ready to attack if necessary, but no... Nothing happened, and after a bit Mozzie let out the breath he'd been holding and relaxed a little.

He put his ear close to the door, but there were no sounds at all. He figured the guy had left, but just to be sure he stayed ready - and quiet - for a few more minutes.

---

Elizabeth had tried comforting Peter when he got home. Tried to make him understand that his initial hesitation in regards to finding Neal hadn't made a difference - and if it had, it was only due to the fact that he somewhere deep down inside wanted Neal to be free. And was that such a bad feeling? No, Peter had agreed, it wasn't, but he still felt like they had lost precious time now that they were almost 100% positive that they needed to not just find Neal and Mozzie, but actually needed to rescue them.



They had gone to bed a couple of hours ago, but it was obvious to both of them that they wouldn't get much sleep. Peter was anxious. Checking his phone on a regular basis to see if he had missed any messages. At one point he even got up to check his email as well. Nothing.

When he climbed back into bed, Elizabeth wrapped his arms around him.

*"Honey"*, she whispered

*"Yeah"*, Peter sighed and turned around to look at her in the sparse light from the street lamps shining through the curtains.

*"What do you think happened?"*, she asked.

Peter caressed her cheek.

*"I don't know"*, he said. *"I wish I knew! Somehow I wish that we'd at least get a ransom demand or something. Then we would have something to work with. We have nothing, hon. Only indications that someone took them both. We don't even know for sure. We have no proof."*

For a while Peter and Elizabeth just laid there, holding each other, lost in their thoughts and silently praying that Neal and Mozzie would be found, safe and sound. Soon.

---

## CHAPTER 11

Since Mozzie had long ago decided that he was getting out of the storage room, it was time to figure out how to pick the lock - or breaking down the door in silence. Maybe it was the adrenaline that had kicked in, when one of his captors spoke to him through the door, but Mozzie suddenly felt full of energy. For a while he carefully investigated every corner and shelf, the floor, the broken chair and everything else in the tiny room, and he realized that he actually had a lot of things to work with.

He grabbed a piece of the broken chair and started cutting into it with the use of the hook. He was glad that his hands were now free so he could reach up, because he really couldn't imagine himself having to pour out his own pee to be able to use the bucket as a stool. Actually, now that he came to think about it, the smell of pee had slowly started spreading in the room. Okay, he definitely needed to get out soon. The first piece of the chair, he tried shaping as the needed tool, appeared to be too fragile when the hook suddenly went all the way through.

Back to the mess of the half broken chair and various pieces of duct tape, Mozzie shuffled through it all and found a new piece and started all over.

He kept scratching the wooden chair leg and slowly he carved a small hole, not too deep, but still big enough for the head of the nail to fit in. After a few attempts going back and forth between the nail and the hook measuring his progress, Mozzie almost cheered out loud when the nail finally got stuck in the piece of wood, he had come to think of as homemade pincers. And he was quite proud the moment the nail finally started moving. Mozzie slowly pulled and wiggled, and twice in 5 minutes he had to bite his tongue to avoid breaking into a loud victory cheer when he pulled out the nail.

In the pile of splinters from the chair Mozzie found one long enough to be his second pick. You damn door, I'm gonna get you know, Mozzie thought. Then he turned around ready to start working on the lock, when he heard a sound from the hallway. Shit! Mozzie had been so focused on finding and creating his tools that he hadn't paid attention to any sounds, and he froze completely. However, he quickly recognized the sound of the other door being unlocked and he sent a few appreciative thoughts at Neal for being the one attracting all the attention. He wondered how long time he had actually spent on carving his tool and pulling out the nail. Mozzie stuck his tools in his pockets and silently grabbed hold of the broom again - ready to attack if whoever was on the other side of the door decided to pay him a visit, too.

---

Neal was half asleep with his chin resting on his chest when he heard the lock on the door again. He had no idea how long time had passed, but it didn't really feel like much more than 5 minutes, though he suspected it had in fact been a lot more.

When the door opened Neal kept the posture, pretending to be sleeping. It really wasn't hard, because he felt rather drained. The light wasn't turned on, but Neal heard the person approaching him from behind.

*"Yo, sleeping beauty, wake up! No rest for the wicked"*, the guy from earlier said in a gruff voice and slapped Neal in the back of the head. Not hard, though, just enough to make sure that if Neal really had been sleeping, he would definitely be awake now.

*"What?"*, Neal said annoyed, lifting his head and looking up at the guy in the dim light shining through the open door.

*"I get no sleep, because I have to keep an eye on you, so you get no sleep either"*, the man smirked and bend down to check the bindings on Neal's legs.

He stood up and walked behind Neal, pulled at the ties on the elbows and then more roughly at the hands. Neal winced a bit. He hadn't really had the opportunity to look for any bruises on his wrists, but he felt sore when the ties cut into his skin. They might have tied him a little looser this time, which meant no numbness, but apparently it also meant feeling the traces of being tightly bound for hours.

*"You're not going anywhere. See you in a little while!"*, the man behind him said ruffling Neal's hair and then heading towards the door.

*"Don't fall asleep now! Oh! And by all appearances your little friend is still alive"*, he added, but before Neal had the chance of asking for more information, the door was shut and locked.

---

Across the hallway Mozzie was listening intently and breathing a sigh of relief when he heard the door being locked and nothing more happened. Still he waited a few more minutes before he got back to his project.

He grabbed his tools from his pocket and set to work on the lock. At first he failed, though. The end of the sliver broke off, but he kept going even though the piece was

now a bit smaller than he had wanted. Mozzie was carefully getting the feeling of the lock, while he felt drops of sweat run down his forehead. Stay focused. Concentrate... Click! Mozzie slowly led out the breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding and took hold of the handle. He listened for any sounds from the hallway. There was nothing. No voices. No steps. He turned off the light in the storage room, and silently he pushed down the handle and opened the door just half an inch to take a peek into the hallway. Nothing to see at all. Mozzie strained his ears even more, almost not daring to breathe when he opened the door wider.

He thanked his clever self for the choice of shoes and the soft rubber soles when he stepped out of the room and across the hallway to the door behind which he expected to find Neal. He put his ear close to it and listened, still hardly breathing. But again he heard nothing.

Mozzie glanced down the hallway. He was seriously exposed out here in the light, but first of all he needed the light to see what he was doing, and second of all he didn't dare turn it off afraid of someone noticing.

He got down on one knee and started working on the lock with his - by now - almost useless wooden pick from the chair. It had to last! Mozzie carefully wiggled his tools, let them become extensions of his fingers, and after a few minutes he heard the long awaited click. He stood and wiped away a few beads of sweat from his forehead before he silently pushed down the handle. The door didn't budge. For a second Mozzie was seriously confused and thought he maybe imagined the click from the lock, but then he looked up and saw the lock bolt. He had been too focused on the key lock to notice it earlier. He eased the lock back as silent as possible and opened the door. The room was all dark except from the light streaming in from the hallway.

---

At first Neal thought he would be left alone at least long enough to take a nap, but then he heard some rustling at the door. He sighed and readied himself for another annoying visit from the guy who - Neal thought about it - was a strange mixture of a bad ass criminal and a softhearted man. Neal didn't feel comfortable about not being able to label the man foe by all means or possible to-be-convinced-friend.

Nobody entered, though, and Neal wondered if he his mind had played tricks on him, but then he definitely heard the door being unlocked. A few seconds passed and the light from the hallway was streaming into the room. Neal turned his head around, still a bit puzzled about who was entering. It didn't sound like any of his and Mozzie's kidnappers. They had never been this silent. What he saw, made him smile big. He'd recognize that silhouette anywhere, anytime.

"Mozz", he whispered.

"Neal? Where are you?", Mozzie asked and opened the door a little more.

The light caught Neal on the chair in the middle of the room, and Mozzie hurried to his friend, catching a last glimpse down the hallway, before he entered the room completely.

"Mozz, are you okay?", Neal asked.

Mozzie put a reassuring hand on his friend's shoulder before he started pulling at Neal's bonds. He hadn't calculated on Neal being tied with zip ties. They would be hard to cut through only with the use of the nail.

*"I'm fine. They left me alone all the time", Mozzie said and continued, "but we need to get out of here. Are YOU okay, Neal? I heard James earlier, and... Are you hurt?"*

Mozzie started checking Neal over for injuries in the dim light, but Neal pulled away.

*"Mozz! Mozzie! I'm fine. Listen to me, I'm fine", Neal said in his most calm voice and continued. "You need to get away, get out of here, get help!"*

*"What do you mean, I need to get away. WE need to get away", Mozzie said and started sticking the nail into one of the zip ties around Neal's right leg, pulling at it at the same time, trying to free him as quickly as possible.*

*"They check on me all the time, Mozz", Neal explained.*

*"If you actually manage to get me out of these ties without scissors or a knife, they'll know in a few minutes that we're gone. We won't get much of a head start, and we need that. We don't know where we are. Get out of the house, get away, hot-wire a car or something. Just..."* Neal took a deep breath. *"Leave me and go!"*

Mozzie stopped working on Neal's bonds.

*"Do you know what they want from..."* Mozzie didn't finish the sentence. Instead he shook his head and continued working on the ties. *"I'm not leaving you, Neal."*

*"Mozz!", Neal said, almost forgetting to keep his voice down. "We won't make it!"*

Mozzie looked at his friend who was staring down at him. He very well knew the expression on Neal's face. He was determined. And Mozzie knew he was right. He had heard all the times their captors had been in the room with Neal. But he had also heard Neal's yells and screams, and his heart told him to save his friend. Mozzie was about to say something, but Neal stopped him.

*"Don't, Mozz... Just go. I'll manage. But hurry. James has ordered new ID papers, and I'm the payment. That's all I know! Pet.. The FBI needs to know of this, before James gets away. You need to get word out to Peter that James is here. Convince him that I didn't run. Now, Mozzie!"*

*"Are you sure about this, Neal?", Mozzie said and threw a glance towards the door before he looked back and locked gaze with Neal.*

*"I'm sure!", Neal stated convincingly.*

Mozzie got up and then he reached behind Neal's back, pushed the nail into his palm and folded Neal's hand around it.

*"Keep this! Just in case... It's all I've got", Mozzie sighed. "The door has a bolt lock on the outside. If I lock that, we can hope that they will simply think they forgot to lock the other one with the key last time they were in here."*

He squeezed Neal's shoulder.

*"Be careful, Neal!"*, he whispered, almost inaudible.

*"I will! And you, too"*, Neal nodded and turned his head away. *"Go!"*

Mozzie hurried out of the room, closed the door behind him and turned around looking at the locks. He honestly hoped that their kidnappers would think that they had forgotten to lock. His fingers hovered over the bolt lock. He didn't like leaving his friend this way, tied to a chair and not least in a room with a lock he couldn't pick from inside.

Mozzie took a deep breath and let it out slowly through his mouth, before he pulled the lock in place.

Now to get out of here, he thought! Before going anywhere, though, he decided to go back to the storage room and take either a part of the chair or the broom with him as a weapon.

He decided on the chair leg that was almost broken off, but still seemed fairly solid. Mozzie silently closed the door to the storage room, before he put one foot down on the chair and with both hands broke off the leg. Mozzie stiffened for a moment. The cracking sound had surprised him. Damn, that was loud! He listened for any sounds from the hallway, but again he praised his luck when he heard nothing.

Mozzie left the room, carefully closing the door, and crept along the wall. He listened at each door he passed, and at one door he sensed the sound of snoring. He didn't dare check any of the closed doors, and the closer he got to the end of the hallway and the rooms they had walked through when they were first brought inside, he heard more sounds. Like a TV or a radio turned down low, but mixed with a more or less constant buzzing or crackling.

He slowly kept going and reached the second to last door. It was partly open and Mozzie sneaked a peek inside. It seemed like it had once been a kitchen - one that was no longer in use. Cupboards along one wall, a table along another, and a sink. Above the sink was a window - a very regular one of its kind! Mozzie pondered... They were most likely far away from other people or anything at all, and so he would definitely need to either steal a car - which would be at the risk of being heard, when the engine started - or go a long way by foot. The alternative would be to find a phone, call for help and then hide somewhere outside.

He walked closer to the window to figure out if he could get out that way easily, when he heard someone yawning loudly. He paused, held his breath. Clearly sounds of someone stretching, some indistinct mumbling, and then he heard footsteps.

---

## CHAPTER 12

When Mozzie closed the door, Neal was left feeling a little jittery. On one hand he was anxious about staying behind, on the other hand he was cheering for Mozzie to get away and get help. But Neal knew that this was their best bet. As long as their abductors kept checking on him regularly, he would have a chance of stalling and giving Mozzie that

extra time he would need to get far enough away to find help.

Neal was smiling to himself, imagining James' face when he would be led away wearing cuffs. Oh yeah, Neal thought, he was definitely looking forward to that!

Then he thought about the nail that Mozzie had given him. Right now it was still in his right palm, but he couldn't keep it there in case he fell asleep and dropped it. Neal started turning and twisting his hands. He would hide it in the waistband of his pants. He could do that, he just needed to... Aarh... come on now! Neal cursed inside. If they hadn't bound his elbows to the chair this would have been so much easier.

After a few minutes of pulling and stretching, twisting and wiggling, Neal had the nail between his index and middle finger, while holding the waistband out with the pinky finger. Carefully, very carefully, Neal tucked the nail into the waistband. Enough for it to get stuck, but not more than he would be able to get it out again using just two fingers.

Aah... mission completed! Neal relaxed for a moment. That actually felt good. To be able to do something, anything. Neal sensed a new round of energy boiling in him. He was ready to do whatever he could to ensure Mozzie got away.

---

Mozzie quickly and quietly pushed the door almost closed - as closed as he seemed to remember it had been before - and then he hid behind it, holding his improvised weapon ready.

He heard the person enter the hallway, open the door across from where Mozzie was hiding, some water running briefly, a little splashing, and then the person walked passed the kitchen door and down the hall.

Mozzie breathed a sigh of relief until he realized that this might be his chance to scout the primary rooms in the house. He had counted at least 4 people - enemies Mozzie stated to himself - and at least one was sleeping and one just passed by. He listened carefully and dared a peak into the hallway.

What he heard wasn't as comforting as he had hoped.

*"What the fuck?"*, the guy said.

Mozzie saw him locking and unlocking the door to Neal's room a couple of times. The now rather confused looking guy glanced around the hallway, and Mozzie quickly pulled back. He heard the guy releasing the bolt lock and entering the room where Neal was, hopefully ready for another late night visit. Keep him with you, Neal, please, Mozzie thought, mentally trying to convey a message to his friend.

Then he made a decision and hurriedly slipped out of the kitchen to the room at the end of the hallway. He discreetly poked his head around the door frame, no one there, flickering lights from a TV, a low buzzing... Mozzie entered.

He looked around, quickly searching for anything useful. He saw no phones, but discovered that the buzzing sound came from something looking like a police scanner. A few seconds of investigation told him, it was just so. Not a radio that could transmit, just a scanner.

From this room there were two doors. Mozzie seemed to recall that they had come through the one on the right when they first were guided into the house. That meant it would lead to a small hallway and then out to the courtyard. He quickly decided to check the door to the left.

At first he listened carefully, holding his ear close to the door. No sounds. Then he pulled down the handle and slowly pushed the door open, just an inch.

This looked like a more modern open kitchen with a dinner table and way more room than the old kitchen Mozzie had discovered a few minutes earlier. He stepped into the room, debated whether or not to turn on the lights. He didn't. Instead he just kept the door open, letting the light from the other room flow into the kitchen. There was a bag on the table. Mozzie shuffled through it and found the taser. He stuffed it in his back pocket. Nothing else seemed useful.

He turned around, scanned the rest of the kitchen. There was another door to the left. Again Mozzie put his ear close to the door, listening for anything that could give away what would be behind it. Nothing. He was just about to push down the handle when something on the kitchen counter caught his eye. Right there, next to 4 beer bottles, was that? Oh, almighty Alexander Graham Bell, a phone!

Mozzie quickly grabbed the cell, went back to the door, pushed down the handle and opened it quietly. A laundry room and... a back door leading outside. No time for hesitation! Be careful Neal, he thought, opened the door and left the house.

---

As soon as Neal heard the captor outside the door, he readied himself, for a moment considering whether to fake being asleep or not. He decided against it since it really hadn't been that long since the last check-up, and the way the guy loudly pulled the door handle and was scrambling with the key in the lock, Neal for sure would've been awake after all.

When the lights were turned on and the door finally opened, the guy almost stalked into the room. Neal turned to look over his shoulder and saw the guy checking behind the door and quickly scanning the room. The keys were still hanging in the key hole, Neal noticed, and the guy turned his attention towards them once more, locking and unlocking and checking to see if it worked all right.

He noticed Neal watching him.

*"What're you looking at, asshole?"*, he snapped.

*"You!"*, Neal shrugged and shook his head a bit. *"Problems with the lock?"*, he asked innocently.

*"Mind your own business"*, the guy said and jiggled the lock a little more.

*"You know... I could help you with that. I'm good with locks... or so I've been told"*, Neal said with a little smirk and turned his head back away from the apparently quite confused man.

Before he had time to say much more, Neal felt a hard push between his shoulder blades. Hard enough that he would have been pushed off the chair if he hadn't been strapped down.

*"Shut up!"*, the man growled and started checking the bonds over. Definitely more thorough this time.

He pulled at each zip tie, using both hands to make sure they were still secure. Neal winced when the ties cut into his wrists once again, but he didn't let the man know that it actually hurt a bit.

*"You checked the ties not that long ago. Do you really think I would still be here, if I had managed to get loose?"*, Neal said as the most natural thing in the world.

*"Oow"*, Neal couldn't prevent the little word from slipping through his lips, when the man grabbed his hair and roughly pulled back Neal's head. He held up his index finger in front of Neal's face.

*"Hush! I don't wanna hear a single peep coming from your mouth the rest of the night, got it?"*, the guy growled.

Neal opened his mouth, just about to say something.

*"Uh-uh!"*, the guy said, shook his head, and pulled a little more at Neal's hair, before he released his grip.

Neal had an extreme desire to rub his scalp and make sure he had no bald patches, because right now he felt like he had just lost a handful of hair. While the man bent down and started pulling on the ties on the left leg, Neal casually checked the floor beside the chair for any large amounts of hair, but he saw none. However, his attention quickly returned to the man in front of him when he felt the bonds on his right leg being checked over. Needless to say, the man was briefly stunned, when the ties easily broke, and Neal's right leg was free.

*"Wow! You're strong!"*, Neal said putting on an impressed facial expression, the best his con man self could muster in the middle of the night.

The man pulled himself together after a few seconds. He looked at Neal, still holding the broken zip tie in his hands.

*"You..."*, he said. *"You did this!"*

He threw the broken tie in Neal's lap and headed for the door.

*"Why do you think so?"*, Neal quickly spoke up and added: *"Maybe you just didn't tie me well enough earlier. You don't have enough brains to secure a prisoner with something as simple as zip ties?"*

Neal knew he was playing with fire here, but he had to keep the guy in the room. He had to buy Mozzie some time. It worked! The man stopped dead in his tracks and turned back around, facing Neal.



*“Oh, you don't wanna go down that road, my friend!”*, the guy said with a slight smile on his face.

*“So I'm your friend now?”*, Neal asked, looking surprised. *“Just a few moments ago I was an asshole, but if I'm your friend now, you probably don't mind releasing the rest of my bonds, right?”*

Neal smiled - one of those wide ear-to-ear grins that Peter hated and always saw as a guarantee for Neal being up to no good.

*“You think, you're so clever, don't ya?”*, the man said, slowly walking back towards Neal, circling the chair, studying him carefully.

*“Actually, yes I do”*, Neal continued, still smiling. *“Even my FBI handler says that I'm smart. See, he likes smart. That's why we made the deal about me working for the FBI. You DO know that I work for the FBI, right? You don't do that unless you're intelligent.”*

Neal followed the guy's movements as much as possible without turning his head all the way around. When he disappeared from Neal's vision, Neal felt the hairs rise in the back of his neck. He sensed it happening just a second before it actually did and pulled up his shoulders, but it didn't make much of a difference when the guy stepped up close behind Neal, slowly snaked his right arm around Neal's neck, locked his hands together and held Neal in a choke grip.

Neal swallowed. He could still breath. It wasn't tight, just uncomfortable.

The man bend down and whispered in Neal's right ear.

*“Lack of oxygen kills brain cells, but you probably know that already...”*, the guy paused and pulled his arm a little tighter around Neal's neck. *“... since you're so smart”*, he continued.

Neal turned his head more to the left, releasing the pressure a little, and concentrated on breathing. The grip still wasn't too tight, but he did feel a little uneasy, and Neal figured he would be in trouble soon if the guy decided to tighten his grip just a tiny bit more.

He felt the warmth of his captor's breath close to his ear and his cheek, as the guy whispered:

*“I could choke you. Right here, right now, without you being able to smart-mouth you out of it.”*

He released his grip and stood, patted Neal on the head and walked in front of him.

*“But I'm not gonna do that, because I'm not allowed to hurt you...”*

Neal breathed deeply and looked up.

*“... seriously”*, the man added and gave Neal a punch right in the stomach.

*“Ungh”*, was the only response from Neal, as he tried bending forward, pulling at his

bonds. He gasped, squirmed in the chair and coughed a little.

*“Oh!”*, the man suddenly realized something. *“But I can hurt your friend!”*

*“NO!”*, Neal yelled through his gasping breath. *“Don’t... Don’t hurt him!”* He coughed again.

*“You’re in no position to tell me what to do or not do!”*, the man huffed, crossing his arms.

*“I think, I might need a little exercise anyway. Boxing sounds nice. I just need a punching bag - I wonder where I could find such one”*, he said, rubbing his chin with his thumb and index finger.

*“Maybe I should check the storage room”*, he smirked, tilted his head a little and looked at Neal.

Neal started pleading, stalling the best he knew.

*“No, please! Please, don’t hurt him. Mozzie’s just a friend. He’s got nothing to do with this, with James or anything.”*

*“I’ll be right back!”*, the man walked towards the door.

*“But you said, you don’t have a key”*, Neal almost yelled.

*“I did say that, didn’t I? But maybe I lied”*, the man said and browsed through the various keys in the bundle.

*“Yup, there it is!”*, he smiled big and held up a key for Neal to see.

Neal tried pleading a little more, but a few seconds later, the door slammed shut, and Neal heard it lock. He waited... Taking a few deep breaths. He could almost hear his own heart pounding in his ears.

*“What the HELL!? Guys! GUYS! Get up, get out here!”*

Neal heard a couple of doors opening, people talking at the same time, things being thrown, yelling.

Mozzie, my man, he thought and closed his eyes momentarily, I hope you had enough time!

And hell broke loose...

---

## CHAPTER 13

A lot of things seemed to happen all at once. It was obvious to Neal that his and Mozzie’s captors were almost tearing down the house in their search of Mozzie, and it didn’t take long before the door was banged open and James stalked into the room. Neal turned around just in time to duck his head and avoid the worst of his father’s anger when he

lashed out at Neal. Instead James grabbed a handful of Neal's t-shirt and pushed him back in the chair forcefully.

*“Where is the little guy? Where's Mozzie?”*, he yelled.

*“I don't know”*, Neal said stoically and added with a little shake of his head: *“But I hope he's far away from here by now!”*

James looked even angrier than the day he had left Neal's apartment after Peter's arrest. From the open door behind him came a gruff voice:

*“He was here! The door was unlocked when I checked upon that piece of shit a little while ago. T and Sean...”*

The guy was interrupted by a yell coming from the other end of the house.

*“My phone is gone! And the taser! He's left the house!”*

James let go of Neal and walked with determination towards the door.

*“Bring him!”*, he said to the other guy, who hurriedly got out his knife and released Neal from the chair.

He pulled Neal up, having a tight grip on his right arm, and almost dragged him out the door. Neal noticed, a little uneasy, that the guy never put away the knife again. It was still far closer to Neal than he preferred.

---

As soon as Mozzie shut the door behind him he activated the display on the phone. First of all, he needed the light, because even though the moon was partly out it was way too dark to see much. He looked up and noticed a few stars shining bright. You never saw stars in New York. Clearly they were far out of the city - otherwise the city lights would have made it impossible to see any.

He quickly ran around the corner of the house, desperately looking for a car. He knew it would be a risk, but it was a risk worth taking, if he could get away that way. Mozzie quickly spotted the van and another car parked close by. He figured James had arrived in the car, and he didn't spend many seconds choosing that one over the van. At the same time he reached the car, he thought of something. Destroy the engine of the van! Cut the tires! Something! He would have to make it impossible for them to follow.

Mozzie ran towards the van, quickly bending down and grabbing a handful of dirt. He opened the lid to the gas tank and threw it in. More, he thought, more! A couple of handfuls later, Mozzie was satisfied.

Then he ran to the front of the van, opened the hood and looked for any cables in the dim light. It wasn't as easy as he had thought, and he had to use all his strength to rip off the only cable he could spot. He pulled so hard, he almost stumbled backwards when it finally loosened and he lost the hold on the hood. He hadn't bothered locking it in place and it shut with a loud bang.

Mozzie quickly got his footings and ran towards the car. At the same time he noticed the

lights being turned on in one of the rooms in the house. It must have been the kitchen. He looked up and saw one of their captors in the window, right where the phone had been. Shoot! He had to hurry. He pulled the door handle, but of course the car was locked. Who locks their car out here, far away from everything?

He didn't have time to find anything to use to unlock the car. He could smash the window! Mozzie searched the ground for a rock big enough to do the trick. Suddenly lights in the courtyard were turned on and Mozzie felt fully exposed. He crouched down behind the car. What do I do? What do I do? He frantically looked around.

When he heard a door opening and people yelling, Mozzie made a decision and ran across the courtyard to the trees along the dirt road leading away from the house. It was just a thin line of threes, but in the darkness they would have to be enough cover. He would hide. He had to hide. He had to. Mozzie held the phone tight in his hand. The light in the display had turned off long ago, but as soon as he pressed a number it would turn on again. Mozzie had to find a hiding place where no one could spot the light from the display.

As silently as possible Mozzie crept along the road, from tree to tree, crouching down in wet grass and behind bushes, treasuring the moonlight. He felt his way with his hand stretched out in front of him, afraid of stepping on a branch or anything else that would cause him to make that revealing noise. Some yelling from the courtyard made him pause for a moment.

*“Get some flashlights!”*

*“The cars are still here!”*

*“He can't have gone far!”*

Mozzie crept down even more, trying to appear as small as a toad, blending in with the shadows.

He heard a car door slamming and a motor starting. He dared to look up a bit and saw the headlights from the car backing up and turning around. When the lights hit the trees right in front of Mozzie, he squeezed down flat on the ground, hardly breathing. The car stopped for a moment.

*“I'll go down the road - check the trees front and back, the hedge, the ditch, everything! Find him!”*

Mozzie recognized the voice of the man in the fancy boots. He had appeared fairly calm the entire time, but he seemed aggravated now. No wonder, Mozzie smiled to himself. He loved causing trouble. But right now he would love even more to get away from here.

As soon as the car had passed his hiding place, Mozzie chanced another glance towards the house. What he saw unnerved him.

---

James was talking loudly on the phone when Neal was dragged out the front door and pushed down on his knees in the gravel. The man let go of his arm, but he kept standing right behind Neal, his left hand with a firm grip on Neal's neck and the right holding the

knife awfully close to his head.

*“There's been a minor change in plans”, James said on the phone. “We need to push forward on the meeting. Get here this morning.”*

James listened to the person on the other end for a moment. Then he continued:

*“I don't care. If you want him, you be here by 9. Bring my papers!”*

He finished the call, barked at the guy behind Neal to go help T look for Mozzie. James turned to face Neal.

*“I told you not to make me do something I was gonna regret. Do you remember that, Neal?”*, he said in a superior voice.

Neal just glared at James. He didn't say a word.

*“I regret one thing. Bringing Mozzie along was a mistake...”*

*“Then you should've just let him be”*, Neal said with a slight smile.

*“... I should've had him killed right away!”*, James continued, like Neal hadn't interrupted him.

Neal tensed, looked right into his father's, James', eyes and said with the most threatening voice of his:

*“If you EVER hurt Mozzie, I guarantee that you will not get to see the sun rise again!”*

James knew that Neal and Mozzie were best friends, maybe the most loyal criminal couple in the country, that they felt protective of each other, but he just laughed, stepped closer to Neal and put his hand lightly on Neal's cheek.

*“You're in no position to make those kinds of promises, son.”*

James rubbed his thumb up and down Neal's cheek like he was comforting a little child. Neal pulled away from his touch. His eyes were shooting daggers.

*“Don't. Call. Me. Son!”*, Neal hissed, enunciating each word clearly.

*“You know, Neal”, James continued, still smiling. “You and I are very much alike. My blood runs in you. I always thought you were as weak as your mom, but apparently you got more than the blue eyes from your old man.”*

*“Don't drag mom into this”*, Neal said, feeling the anger returning full force. *“You ruined her life. You ruined MY life. YOU are the weak one, you were too weak to be a decent husband, to be a decent father. You were too much of a coward to stand up and tell the truth about shooting...”*

James cut Neal off by backhanding him hard. Neal was caught completely off guard, he lost his balance, and toppled over in the dirt. James got down on one knee, and in a swift move he had Neal lying face down, holding him down by placing most of his weight

on his back.

*“If you ever call me weak or a coward again, to hell with my papers or new identity. I’ll beat the crap out of you, making it up for all those times during your childhood where your mom didn’t have the strength to teach you manners and respect”*, James almost whispered in Neal’s ear.

Then he took hold of Neal’s head with a tight grip on his hair and pulled backwards slowly.

*“Show your face, Mozzie!”*, James yelled loudly. *“I’ll smash his pretty face, if you don’t get back here. Come out, come out, where ever you are!”*

Right there and right then Neal decided that he’d had enough, enough of everything that involved his so-called father, and as soon as James released the pressure on his back to scout the area for Mozzie, Neal rolled around and kicked James right in the gut. James only managed a muffled sound of discomfort, losing his breath completely. Neal scrambled to his feet, launched a knee to James’ chest causing him to fall over. Neal hardly deigned his father a look, before he turned around and ran.

Neal’s hands were still tied securely behind his back, and even though he still had the nail hidden in his waistband, he quickly decided it would be faster finding a knife, some scissors, or another tool in the house. He ran back in, back to the lion’s den, Neal thought, but since all the “lions” were outside, he figured he would have enough time to free his hands and get out.

He heard James yelling behind him, apparently he had gotten his bearings back.

*“You son of a bitch! T! Greg!”*

Neal didn’t hear the rest. He was back in the living room, quickly scanning his surroundings, moved on to the kitchen, pulled open a couple of drawers, before he spotted the knives hanging on the wall near the stove. He jumped up on the table - he succeeded in the second try - sitting with his back against the wall, rubbing his hands up and down on the first knife he got his hands on. It only took a few seconds before the zip ties broke, and Neal was able to move his hands in front of him - for the first time in hours. His shoulders ached with the movement. They felt partly numb, he realized now that he could move freely again.

Neal quickly grabbed one of the knives - a slim, not too big one - and shuffled through one of the drawers to find the meat hammer he had spotted just a couple of minutes earlier. He noticed he was bleeding, but he didn’t have time to care about that now.

He ran back towards the front door, but stopped abruptly right outside when he noticed “the Hulk” at James’ side. James was back on his feet, but didn’t seem all that ready to beat the promised crap out of Neal.

Neal’s intention was to get to the van, but right now both James and T - still aka “The Hulk” in Neal’s mind - were blocking the way. Instead he turned right, jumped over something that was probably once supposed to be a flower bed and ran towards the darkness and the trees. He suspected Mozzie had done the same and was hiding somewhere. Mozzie wasn’t much of a runner, Neal knew that, and since his friend hadn’t

managed to get away in a car, Neal figured he must still be somewhere not too far away, hiding. Now that he knew a phone was missing, hopefully it meant that Mozzie had already called for help.

Running in the darkness, barefooted, wasn't the most optimal way of completing an escape, but his choices were limited, and Neal definitely chose mother nature over his captors.

---

Mozzie had been watching the commotion intently while trying to stay low and out of the way of the beams from the flash lights. He winced on Neal's behalf when he saw him topple over, and he unconsciously moved a hand to his groin when he saw Neal send James to the ground with a kick. Neal's escape gave Mozzie the break he had been looking for. He quickly moved further down the road, noticing the ditch running along, and at one point he almost stumbled over a huge root. Mozzie crouched down behind it, shielding the phone as much as possible, and as he had done many times before, he thanked whoever or whatever that once had decided to gift Mozzie with perfect recall. Then he pressed Peter's number, noticing the signal was only one bar, but it was there. It was enough. At least he hoped so.

---

In the early morning hours both Peter and Elizabeth finally fell asleep, but for Peter it was nowhere close to peaceful, and when the alarm went off, he almost felt more tired than when he went to bed the night before. He lashed out a hand, hit the alarm clock on the night stand and rubbed his eyes. The alarm kept sounding. He lashed out again and sent the alarm clock to the floor.

*"Hon?"*, El questioned.

It was still ringing. How stubborn can an alarm clock be, Peter thought.

*"Hon!"*, El shook his shoulder. *"Get that, it's your phone!"*

Peter grabbed his phone and looked at the display with only one eye open. Unknown number.

*"Peter Burke!"*, he said, a little hoarse.

Morning voice. He cleared his throat and sat up, resting his feet on floor that felt a little chilly.

The connection wasn't good, and he could hardly hear anything.

*"Hello? Who is this?"*, Peter asked, while turning the alarm clock on the floor around with his foot. 4:30 AM. Who would be calling him at this ungodly hour?

*"Suit, track the call!"*

*"Mozzie??"*

Peter was suddenly wide awake and he bolted out of bed. Elizabeth turned on the light,

and Peter signaled to her to get her phone and come along. While descending the stairs, he strained his ears to hear what Mozzie was saying on the other end of the line, but he only caught bits and pieces.

*“... trouble... track it... where we are... but hurry”*

Peter felt frustrated, but the adrenaline started pumping through his body.

*“Mozzie, I can hardly hear you. Are you with Neal? Are you okay? Just stay on the phone!”*, he said.

He briefly turned the microphone away from his mouth.

*“Call the office. Call Diana and Jones!”*, Peter ordered and shuffled through his briefcase he had grabbed from the dining table. He threw a note book in the hands of Elizabeth and got back to the conversation.

*“... not sure... James... coming!”*, Mozzie was rambling off a lot of information.

*“James??”*, Peter asked surprised.

He once again told Mozzie that he couldn't hear him properly, but he should stay on the line. He almost yelled into the mobile, like it would help improving the connection, the louder he spoke. At one point the conversation silenced. He put the phone on speaker and placed it on the table to put on the clothes Elizabeth had grabbed for him before leaving their bedroom.

*“Mozzie? Mozzie are you there? Mozzie!!”*

*“Diana and Jones will meet you at the office. Jones took over on the tracking of the call”*, Elizabeth quickly explained.

She left and came back with Peter's shoes and car keys. Peter yelled at the phone again.

*“Mozzie? Answer me, god dammit!”*

But even though the phone call was still active, there was nothing. No Mozzie, no talking. Just a static noise.

---

## CHAPTER 14

Usually it would easily take 15-20 minutes for Peter to get to the White Collar office due to traffic, but at this early in the morning it didn't take much more than 10 minutes. However, Peter hardly recalled the trip afterwards, because he had spent the entire time trying to get Mozzie to talk on the phone, but it had been futile. At some point he thought he heard someone talking on the other end, but he couldn't hear much. It seemed like Mozzie was gone, though the connection still appeared to be open. Peter felt frustrated. So close to - and yet so far from - getting useful information.

Peter spotted a free parking space across the street, pretty much right in front of the FBI building. “Doris Day Parking”, he thought to himself and smiled a little when thinking



back to the day he had explained that phrase to Neal and Jones. He grabbed his phone and made sure not to disconnect the call by coincidence, before he ran to the lobby, got on the elevator and reached the 21<sup>st</sup> floor.

He was happy to see that Jones had already made it there as well, and Diana was on her way as soon as Theo's nanny showed up. Jones explained to Peter that he had set up the tracking of the call, and they had already narrowed it down to an area east of Beacon, about 1½ hour drive north of New York City. But it was a rather large forest area, and the mobile service was not that good around there which meant that the signal kept pinging between towers quite far from each other.

Suddenly their attention was pointed towards Peter's phone which he had placed on the table in the conference room. It sounded like someone was there.

*"Hello?? Mozzie? Mozzie, are you there?"*, Peter said, eagerly waiting for a response. He repeated Mozzie's name a couple of time and checked the duration of the call - it had been about 18 minutes since he had last heard any words from Mozzie.

---

As soon as Neal got to the end of the house and ran in the direction away from there, everything became a dark mess of plants, trees, stones and other things he couldn't see. The moon had been out earlier, but it was gone at the moment, and with no light at all Neal had no chance of knowing where he was going. He only knew that the house was behind him and he was trying to get as far away from that as possible. He could hear the men clearly, not far behind, and once in a while he almost got caught by one of the beams from the flashlights. He almost stumbled a couple of times. He had to slow down! Crashing to the ground because he couldn't see shit would do him no good right now.

He stopped for a moment. He was still clutching the meat hammer in one hand and the knife in the other, and it was too dangerous. If he fell, he could end up stabbing himself. He stuffed the knife in the back of his pants, actually cutting through the fabric to make sure it would stay there. He decided to hold on to the hammer - just as a precaution - and a few minutes later that turned out to be a very good decision.

Neal was shuffling through some high grass, feeling his way along some bushes with thorns, probably black thorns, he thought, since he knew they usually grew places like these, when a beam of a flashlight suddenly fell upon him.

*"I GOT HIM!"*, the guy yelled. *"He's over here!"*

Neal jumped up, ready to run, but his t-shirt got stuck in the bushes. He was desperately trying to free himself, when he turned around and saw the guy coming straight at him. At the same time as Neal pulled away from the thorns, ripping his t-shirt, he swung his arm with the hammer aiming for the guy. He hit the hand with the flashlight which flew several feet away, and his aim had apparently been perfect, since the guy didn't even try to hold back the scream that left his mouth when the hammer collided with his hand.

The abrupt attack from Neal completely caught the man off guard. This was enough for Neal to take off in another direction, away from the now loudly cursing guy. He hadn't even had time to register who of their captors it was. Instead he was deeply focused on trying to see where he was running. He gave away too much noise, he thought. Where ever he ran, he kept stepping on branches and dead leaves, breaking and crushing

everything beneath his feet, and the noise sounded awfully loud in Neal's ears.

At one point the moon came out again, and Neal paused close to a tree, trying to get a view of his surroundings.

*"Neal! Hey!"*, a whispering voice sounded from somewhere close by.

*"Mozz?"*, Neal quickly scanned the area in the direction of the voice.

He noticed a brief glimpse of a mobile display and ran in that direction, while keeping an eye over his shoulder, watching for any signs of their captors or the flashlights. He could hear them, but he couldn't see them. If Neal felt he had been making a loud escape it was nothing compared to their captors. They definitely didn't try to be quiet. Good. That gave Neal and Mozzie an advantage.

He reached a tangle of roots.

*"Mozz?"*, he whispered.

In the same second someone grabbed his left arm and roughly pulled Neal down. He almost stumbled, wincing a bit when his foot scraped over the edge of a root. Mozzie shoved the phone in the hands of Neal and almost inaudibly said:

*"The Suit's on the phone!"*

Neal let the hammer fall the ground and grabbed the phone, held it to his ear, and quietly said:

*"Peter, are you there?"*

He couldn't hear much. It sounded like someone said "oz", but the reception was really bad, and after a few more tries of getting through to Peter, Neal gave up. He kept the phone to his ear, though, just in case, but instead he directed his attention to Mozz.

*"Are you okay?"*, he asked his friend.

*"Yeah, Neal - I'm okay. You?"*

Mozzie sounded almost breathless. Neal figured it was the adrenaline. He felt the same way. Okay, he had been running, too, but still. The adrenaline was definitely flowing through his system.

*"I'm fine"*, he said.

*"What's the plan?"*, Mozzie asked.

*"We get away from here!"*, Neal stated the obvious.

*"Yeah, well... Even though that brilliant mind of yours usually works fast, I'm already ahead of you on that point"*, Mozzie said and pointed at the phone in Neal's hand.

*"Do we wait for the cavalry to show up?"*

Neal shook his head.

*“We are too far away for that. James and his goons will find us long before that if we stay here. We have to split! If they catch us together, we’re screwed.”*

Mozzie hushed at Neal and pulled him further down. A few seconds later the headlights from the car swept above them, and the car was slowly approaching their hiding place.

Neal whispered to Mozzie:

*“Whoever James has made a deal with is coming at 9 am.”*

Neal looked at the phone shielding the light from the display with his hand.

*“It’s 4:50 now. That’s 4 more hours, and we don’t know when...”, he paused, “or if... Peter and the others will find us.”*

The car drove by slowly not too far away, and they both ducked down, keeping quiet. They could still hear yells and other sounds from the men looking for them somewhere further away, but as long as they didn’t appear to be directly approaching their hiding place, Neal felt secure enough to continue the conversation.

*“I say we keep moving towards the main road, but on each side of this dirt road. We didn’t drive on this one that long, so it can’t be far”,* Neal said.

*“I think there’s a ditch running along the road”,* Mozzie added. *“I’ll follow that one, but Neal...”*. He hesitated.

*“What?”*, Neal inquired.

*“I agree we can’t stay together, but we also cannot be far from each other. We don’t want to get lost in the woods. We have no idea where we are, what’s in there.”*

*“Don’t get paranoid, Mozz!”*, Neal smirked at his friend.

*“I’m not. I’m thinking logical here”,* Mozzie argued.

*“I know what you mean”,* Neal calmly said, *“and you’re right! We stick together, yet we don’t stick together.”*

*“Who gets the phone?”*, Mozzie asked.

Neal chanced a look at the display. The call was still on, but the battery was running low. He brought it back to his ear.

*“Peter, are you there? Can you hear me? Peter?”*

---

*“Peter?”*

*“Neal?!”*, Peter said loudly and grabbed the phone, holding it closer, but still on speaker

for Jones to listen along.

“... *orest... don't know...*”, was what they heard. Both Peter and Jones strained their ears.

“...*hind this... ames... nine...*”, it was definitely Neal trying to tell them something.

When he quieted for a moment, Peter quickly, almost yelling, told him to keep the line open, that they were tracking the call, but they needed more time.

“... *battery...*”, was the next word they managed to decipher from Neal through the crackling connection.

Peter grimaced and swept his hand across his face. No, not now! They didn't have an exact location yet.

“... *hurry!*”, was the last word they got from Neal, before the call was ended.

Peter sighed deeply, a little frustrated. At the same time Diana entered the room.

“*What have you got?*”, she asked.

“*We just lost the connection*”, Jones said and explained what they had managed to gather from the phone call.

A couple of other agents were coming into the office thanks to Diana, who had called in their colleagues while spending her time waiting for the nanny. Peter summoned them all to the conference room. He was happy to see how each and everyone of them seemed to be just as eagerly ready for a break-through as he was.

After a brief meeting, in which they had discussed the conversation with Neal and Mozzie, they all set to do various tasks.

Some were following up on the tracking. Some set to look for what was in the area they had already narrowed it down to, and others started looking for traces of James.

Neal had said “*nine*”, which could mean several things. Road number 9, a part of an address, 9 bad guys, 9 o'clock... They had to look for anything and everything with a 9, but if Neal had referred to the time it could be something happening at 9 this morning. Peter looked at his watch. That gave them less than 4 hours.

He called up Missing Persons and gave an update on the latest development. They had been working on the surveillance during the night, and they had a lead on a van which had actually been going in the same direction, up north, but they had lost it when it left the city. They had, however, been able to get a license plate, but they had turned out to have been stolen from another car.

Peter decided that he better call the Marshal's Office, too, and he tried to sound as authoritative as possible when he quickly informed them that they now had proof that Neal had been kidnapped and was not an escapee. Okay, to be honest they didn't have real proof right now, but the phone call from Mozzie and Neal was good enough for Peter. He certainly knew that Mozzie turning to the FBI was enough proof that they were

really in trouble. He thought back to the day that Neal and he had dragged Mozzie into the office under the threat of him being arrested if he didn't comply. Yup, Mozzie and Neal were most definitely in trouble!

When Peter disconnected the call to the Marshal's he noticed a text message from Elizabeth. She would call off the moving van and wouldn't leave for D.C. until she knew that Neal and Mozzie were safe.

Peter texted her back, only three words: "Love you, hon!"

"Love you, too. Go find them, Peter.", El wrote back a few seconds later. I'm working on it, he thought, and I will.

Jones knocked on the door to Peter's office, and Peter put his phone down on the desk to focus on the job. They had a lot of work to do, and they had to find Neal... his friend... and Mozzie as quickly as possible. Agents from Missing Person's would be joining them in a few minutes, and for once Peter was happy to take advantage of their experience in cases like this one. Peter was good at finding forgeries - and Neal, which in this case was a major advantage - but he did need the skills of the trained agents from the other division.

Jones handed him some papers and they set to work.

---

Neal disconnected the call.

*"What are you doing?"*, Mozzie asked. *"We should've kept the line open!"*

Neal shook his head.

*"It's better we save the battery. They can still trace it."*

He started texting, writing a brief summary of what he had been trying to say on the phone. They were in a forest area far from the city, James was involved, Neal was part of a bargain, the names that Neal had caught during the commotion earlier, and finally that something was going down at 9 am. He paused for a moment, took a deep breath and then finished the text message with a simple command: "Find us!"

Before he pushed the send button, Mozzie grabbed Neal's arm with the words *"Oh-oh..."* and pointed over Neal's shoulder.

Neal looked up and realized that their captors had closed in on them. At least two flashlights were quickly approaching their hiding place, and the voices became louder. One was obviously following the ditch, one was on the road, and soon Neal and Mozzie would be caught right between the two of them.

The light from one of the flashlights hit the ground not far from Neal's feet, sliding close by. He quickly pushed the send button on the phone, not knowing if the message went through, turned off the display, and pushed the phone under some roots. Then he hurriedly shoveled some leaves upon it.

He grabbed Mozzie by the shoulders, tried to focus on his face in the dim light from the

moon. The flashlight beam coming from the man walking down the road swept by inches from them.

*“Run!”*, Neal ordered in what could best be described as a yelling whisper. And they did!

---

## CHAPTER 15

Mozzie almost scrambled forward, losing his footing a couple of times, but managed to keep moving. He ran from tree to tree, jumping or climbing over roots, ducking under branches. He had quickly decided to stay away from the ditch, he'd be way too exposed down there.

He could hear yelling behind him, people running, and though he knew that Neal must be somewhere to his right, probably a little ahead of Mozzie, he couldn't see him or point out exactly where he would be.

A few times he was almost caught by the lights, but Mozzie kept running. There was no time for strategic thinking, at this moment it was all about creating space between him and the captors.

He panted. He was so not in shape for running like this, and definitely not in the middle of something, Mozzie thought of as a jungle. Yeah, okay... He knew it was nothing like that, but he was kind of sure that people weren't created to run such places. Were people created to run at all? He doubted it...

After what felt like an eternity of running - but was more like only 10 minutes - Mozzie was almost out of breath. He felt a stitch forming in his right side. He looked behind him and saw no one, but he could still hear them. He bent over for a moment, taking a few deep breaths. He clutched his hand to his right side, tried stretching. Yes, definitely in no shape.

Suddenly Mozzie heard someone getting closer. Someone who was most certainly not Neal.

*“I'm gonna get ya, you little shit head!”*, a guy yelled. *“I saw you. You won't get away!”*

Mozzie hurriedly looked around. The dim light from the moon didn't give him much to work with, but after a few seconds he crouched down behind the nearest tree. Think Mozz, think, he thought. Climbing a tree could be an option. Mozzie turned his head upwards, looking at the tree behind him. No. He was no monkey, but he did have a monkey on his back. And very soon that would be a huge monkey, a gorilla maybe even!

The guy chasing him was close. Mozzie could see the lights searching the ground nearby. He pressed his back to the tree, and a few seconds later he could see the shape of a man half walking, half running, past the tree where Mozzie was hiding. He held his breath. Didn't move. He followed the guy's movements closely as he stopped about 60 feet from Mozzie's hiding place. To Mozzie it was obvious that the guy had realized that he could no longer hear Mozzie running in front of him.

The light from the flashlight swept across the ground, at the trees in front of Mozzie, towards the ditch on the right side. Slowly. Searching. The man turned to the left,

slightly moving a bit forward. The light kept searching for movement, and Mozzie stayed still. A noise coming from somewhere close to the dirt road made the man turn around quickly. The flashlight pointed in the direction of the sound.

*"It's me, Greg! You see them?"*, another voice sounded.

The man close to Mozzie responded:

*"The little one. He's here. He was just here. Can't be far!"*

*"Oh, you're right on that one!"*, a breathless voice sounded next to Mozzie, as he felt himself caught in the light as a deer caught in the headlights of a car on a dark road.

---

As soon as Neal had launched himself into motion he quickly headed towards the dirt road. A few seconds of scanning in both directions told him to take the chance of crossing the open road, heading towards whatever vegetation was on the other side.

It was more like a forest with a mixture of larger trees and smaller ones in between. No grass, and the ground was rough to his bare feet. He had to go uphill to get away from the road, but it also gave him a better visual the few times he could see through trees and branches towards the road. He clearly saw two flashlights not that far behind, one on the road, one where he and Mozzie had been just a few minutes earlier.

A little further behind he saw the headlights of the car approaching again, slowly, with someone in the passenger seat having a flashlight, too, searching along the road.

Neal felt comfortable that they hadn't seen him cross the road, and he stopped for a moment checking out his surroundings. The light from the moon didn't really reach down through the leaves and the treetops. He debated whether to move further into the forest, but quickly decided it would be too dangerous. He wouldn't be able to see anything at all, and he would risk getting too far away from the road.

He started moving forwards again, not really running, because every step was like walking on broken glass. What he wouldn't give for a pair of shoes right now! He stopped regularly to keep an eye on the surroundings. Whatever he did, tripping and tumbling downhill would be the worst thing to do, so better move carefully, as long as he didn't have any people directly behind him.

A few minutes later Neal noticed the car driving by slowly. He threw himself to the ground and stayed still. When he dared looking up, he chanced a look downwards to the road. He saw the silhouette of one of the men on the dirt road, apparently having stopped. The taillights from the car were slowly moving away in the opposite direction.

Neal could hear the men talking, but he wasn't able to decipher everything. The man on the road disappeared in between the trees, but Neal could still catch glimpses of the flashlight once in a while. He tried to figure out how far he was from the place he and Mozzie had been hiding. How far would Mozzie be by now? Even though Neal had crossed the road and had to run a little uphill, he was sure he would be ahead of Mozzie. Mozzie didn't have the same speed as Neal, but Mozzie had shoes!

Neal shivered. Laying on the ground in a forest in the middle of the night, or very early

morning as it was by now, wearing only a t-shirt and sweat pants, he could suddenly feel the chilly weather now that he wasn't running around. Most of the adrenaline rush had worn off, too, and even though he could still feel his heart beating heavily, he also slowly became more aware of how exhausted he felt.

His attention was caught by the car coming back. This time a little faster. Too fast for someone being on the lookout for fugitives, Neal thought, a little puzzled. The car stopped pretty much in front of Neal's hiding space at the same time as the lights from two flashlights came through the trees on the other side of the road.

What Neal saw next made his heart drop. Fuck! Fuck, fuck, fuck!

---

Mozzie was hoisted to his feet with T having a firm grip on his arm. Greg quickly approached and was about to say something when T stopped him.

*"Call the boss, tell'em we got one!"*

T shook Mozzie like he was a rag doll. Well, no wonder actually, Mozzie thought, because he seemed like twice Mozzie's size.

*"Where's your buddy?"*, he asked.

*"What buddy?"*, Mozzie feigned surprise.

*"Yeah, boss. We got the little one. He won't say where the other one is"*. Greg listened to the other end of the phone.

*"If that's James on the phone, tell him that even if I DID know where Neal was right now - which I obviously don't - I would never rattle on him. I'm no coward like James!"*, Mozzie stated firmly.

Greg just shot him a quick glance, then turned his back to Mozzie.

*"Yes, got it. We'll meet ya there!"*, Greg said and disconnected the call. He turned towards T.

*"Gonna come back. We just bring him to the road. They'll be right there"*, he said.

*"Come on!"*, T growled and pulled Mozzie in the direction of the road.

---

With the lights from the car it was easier for Neal to see what was going on. James and the man with the cowboy boots - Sean, he remembered - got out of the car, as the other two men came through the trees having Mozzie between them. Sean opened one of the back doors, grabbed something which Neal suspected were ties of some kind, because soon Mozzie's hands were pulled behind his back.

*"You are the worst and most rude host, I've ever met!"*

Neal smiled when he heard Mozzie speaking clearly - and a little louder than necessary



considering James being only a few feet away from him. The message was clearly meant for Neal in case he was anywhere nearby. Which he was of course. On one hand he wished he wasn't, because he had a hard time holding himself back and not running to Mozzie's rescue right away. On the other he was glad that he was able to keep an eye on things.

He saw James walking up to Mozzie, saying something that Neal couldn't hear.

*"HA!", Mozzie almost yelled. "In your dreams, traitor! Neal got away a long time ago."*

James signaled to his men. They brought Mozzie to the car and roughly shoved him in to the backseat. T stuck his head in after him, and from the front seat Sean was doing something, too. Neal couldn't quite see, but he figured they were somehow securing Mozzie in the back of the car. Neal let his forehead rest on the ground and took a deep breath. What would be the best thing to do? He could crawl backwards, get away from the hill and then continue towards the road. When he got there, he might have a better chance of finding out where they were, maybe he could flag down a passing car and call Peter with more information. But what if there was no traffic on the main road this early? He could find a hiding place and wait for the FBI to show up. That could take hours.

He could also circle around and head back to the house, try to get to the van as was his first intention. If their captors brought Mozzie back to the house, he might even be able to free his friend first. Would they even consider that Neal would return to the house after having escaped?

Neal was abruptly pulled out of his own thoughts when he heard the well-known, angry, voice of his fa... James.

*"NEAL!!"*

Neal lifted his head slightly to look down at James. A few seconds went by in absolute silence.

*"NEAL!! Where ever you are, you get your ass moving and get back here. NOW!",* James yelled.

*"Let's keep searching for him",* T said, grabbed a flashlight and was about to start down the road.

*"No, wait!",* James said.

*"Neal",* James went at it again. *"You know I don't need Mozzie for this".*

He raised his voice a little more.

*"Don't make me do something, YOU are gonna regret!",* he continued.

Neal swallowed. James wouldn't hurt Mozzie without reason. He wasn't evil per se. Mozzie had helped James hiding in a safe house, and James knew Mozzie. They had worked together in finding the evidence box.

*“Pull him out”, Neal heard James giving orders. “If he's nearby, he won't let his little friend get hurt.”*

T and Greg pulled Mozzie out of the car, and now Neal could clearly see that he had been bound on hands and feet. Mozzie cursed at his captors.

*“You might as well let me go, if you don't need me. I told you already. Neal is gone. He got away!”*

*“Shut up!”*, Sean snapped at Mozzie who was snaking around on the ground.

James walked to the rear end of the car, opened the trunk and pulled out some rope. Neal felt his heart beating even faster.

*“Bring him here”*, James ordered his goons, and two of them lifted Mozzie up between them and carried him behind the car. Mozzie didn't make it easy for them, and Neal noticed that they almost dropped him at one point.

*“Stop struggling, you little shit!”*, T growled.

Neal saw James bend down, tie one end of the rope to the bumper. What the hell was he doing?

The other end was tied to Mozzie's feet, when Greg and T placed him on the ground.

No... Neal slowly shook his head.

*“What are you doing, boss?”*, Greg asked anxiously.

*“We are gonna drag him”*, James answered dryly, but still loud enough for Neal to hear him.

*“We're gonna what??”*, Greg asked surprised.

T and Sean looked at each other. They were clearly as surprised as Greg and not comfortable at all with the entire situation. James stood up, looked around for a couple of seconds, before he yelled into the air again.

*“NEAL! I know you're out there. If you wanna see what happens to a body being dragged after a car, I suggest you stay where you are. Otherwise...”*, he paused and turned in another direction.

*“You've got 1 minute to make yourself visible!”*

James told his goons to spread out and Greg to run a bit further down the road and pass on the message. A few seconds later Neal heard Sean's voice call out not that far away:

*“Show yourself, Neal, if you don't want us to hurt your friend!”*

Neal kept quiet and pressed himself to the ground even more.

Shortly after he heard Greg yell down the road.

*“Neal, it's your last chance to save your friend!”*

Neal raised his head again and looked at Mozzie, lying there behind the car, trying to get free, wriggling and pulling at his bonds.

*“30 seconds, Neal!”*, James yelled and crouched down in front of Mozzie.

*“Call for him!”*, he said.

*“No way”*, Mozzie spat back.

Neal sensed a little nervousness in his voice, but Mozzie probably also knew, that James wouldn't go through with this. Neal heard one of the other men call out his name again, further away this time, passing on the message from James.

*“Last chance, Neal!”*, James said loudly facing in Neal's direction this time. Almost like he knew he was there.

*“10 seconds!”*, he added and turned towards Mozzie.

*“You really don't want him to save your sorry ass?”*, James asked.

*“How can he, when he is no longer here?”* Mozzie really tried to sound brave, but Neal could hear the entire situation was starting to get to him.

*“You're gonna regret this... and so is Neal”*, James said.

*“You're not gonna do this”*, Mozzie stated.

*“Try me!”*, James simply said and walked towards the driver's side of the car.

*“Call for him”*, he added before he got in the car and turned on the engine.

Mozzie tried to swallow, but his mouth was as dry as a desert. James wouldn't do this. James is not a murderer... Oh, wait a second! Yes, he is. Mozzie saw the break lights turn off. He heard the sound of the engine change. The car door slammed shut.

*“Okay mon frère, this might be a good time for you to drop by after all... If you're here!”*, Mozzie said quickly, almost as it was all just one word. He heard the tires start to move on the gravel, felt the rope tighten...

Neal couldn't believe his own eyes. When the car actually started moving slowly, Neal's heart almost skipped a beat. He saw the rope tighten between Mozzie and the car, imagined James placing his foot on the speeder. The house wasn't far, but it was far enough away for Mozzie to be shredded to pieces by the time James would park in the court yard.

Then the car started dragging Mozzie - who was struggling desperately by now - one foot, two feet, still slowly.

*“NEEEAAAAL!”*, Mozzie screamed, panic-stricken.

Neal shot up, almost tumbled down the hill.

*“MOOOZZ!! STOOOP! NO! STOOOOOP!”*

He reached the car, started banging on the windows, frantically trying to grab hold on something to make the car stop. When Neal banged on the passenger side window, James stopped. Neal was panting. He had stopped banging on the windows, but he still had both hands resting on the car, one on the window, one on the frame. He was looking down on his feet, barely registering, trying to catch his breath. His heart was hammering like it would break through his rib cage any second.

Neal looked up, his eyes starting to focus again, and when they finally did he was staring into the blue, and very cold eyes, of his father. There was no emotion at all, no smile, no sorrow, nothing.

---

The sound of the car engine being turned on a few minutes earlier had alarmed Greg, T and Sean who had all hurried back in time to see Neal desperately trying to save his friend. They were all rather shocked that their boss had actually gone through with his threat, and for a few seconds they were all just standing still, passively watching, before they finally acted.

T untied the rope and half carried, half dragged an almost limp Mozzie to the side of the car. Not that Mozzie was unconscious or anything, he was simply too shook up to do anything, but getting his breathing under control.

Neal was still staring at James, frozen in place, when he felt two sets of hands roughly pulling him back, pushing him to the ground. He felt a knee in his back, and within seconds his hands were securely tied behind his back. Neal didn't struggle at all. He didn't say anything. But he did feel his eyes watering. Not because he was hurt. Not really because he was disappointed. Mostly because he felt disgusted by having James' blood running in his body.

---

## CHAPTER 16

Back in the White Collar office everyone were busy working the new leads. They were looking at maps over the area that the cell phone's signal had been traced to. It was a rather large area covering forests, ponds and lakes as well as smaller towns. Neal had said the word “nine”, and they were now working on a theory that he had been referring to Route 9 going up north and not that far from Beacon.

The team was trying to pin point various possible locations, but it seemed like Neal and Mozzie could be in a thousand different places.

Peter was anxious, but he tried to stay calm and in control, giving out orders, commanding his people to do this or do that. He looked at his watch. A little after 5 AM, and it was about 20 minutes since he had spoken to Neal on the phone. Peter was thankful of his team being ready to work this hard at this time of the day... morning... He wouldn't even call it day yet.

About 20 minutes - and a lot of theories about Neal's and Mozzie's abduction - later, Peter felt his phone buzz in his pockets. He figured it was El asking for an update. She would have to wait a bit, since they were all just about to go through the first list of possible suspects. All were people who had some kind of connection to James Bennet.

Another 15 minutes later and Peter needed a break - and some coffee. He would've loved to down one of those fabulous ones that Neal usually brought back from a coffee run, but right now he would have to settle for the bureau "mud".

After having poured his coffee, Peter took out his phone to get back to El. But what he saw on the display wasn't El's number. He quickly read the message - and then he read it again, before springing into action.

*"Jones! Diana!"*, he yelled and ran up the stairs to the conference room.

*"It's from Neal!"*, he said almost breathless and slid the phone across the table for Jones and Diana to read.

*"9 AM!"*, Jones exclaimed and looked at his watch.

*"That's just a little more than 3 hours from now"*, Diana quickly added.

Peter quickly left the conference room again and standing on top of the stairs he summoned the entire team to the conference room right away. They finally had something useful to work with. Names, a time and an approximate area that they were still trying to narrow down even further. That part they would have to work on a LOT faster. And they would have to split up, getting a team ready and move up north as soon as possible, hoping for the people back in the office to have more information for them when they got closer to the area east of Beacon.

Going by car would take about one and a half hour. Peter immediately decided to call the higher-ups trying to get a helicopter. He would even ask Kimberly Rice from the Missing Persons' Department to demand the helicopter, too, if Peter couldn't convince his bosses. Diana was already getting in contact with local police and within a few minutes the entire White Collar division, as well as Missing Persons', were buzzing like busy bee hives on a hot summer day.

And Peter smiled when looking back at his phone... Just a tiny smile that he couldn't hold back after hours of frustrations, doubts and uncertainty. He nodded slightly.

*"We'll find you, Neal, we'll find you"*, he whispered. *"Trust me!"*

Only Diana heard him. She looked at Peter, put her hand on his arm and gave it a light squeeze telling Peter that he was right. They were going to find Neal and Mozzie - in time! It was going to be tight, but they could this. No matter what it would take, she promised herself.

---

Mozzie was starting to feel like he still had limbs connected to his body. His legs were shaking, but he no longer thought that his knees would buckle under him if T decided to let go of him. For once he was actually pleased that his captor had a pretty tight grip on

him. But of course he didn't reveal that to anyone. That would be for Mozzie's thoughts only. Not even Neal needed to know that.

*"You okay?"*, Mozzie heard the faint voice of T behind him.

Mozzie nodded: *"Yeah... of course."*

He was slightly disappointed in himself that he was too shaken up to say something witty, and at the same time he sensed that T actually asked him with concern. That was a bit surprising, he thought. Mozzie straightened a bit and tried to appear way tougher than he actually felt like right now.

He caught a glimpse of Neal on the ground next to the car. For a brief moment they exchanged looks, but after a second Neal turned his head away. In that moment Mozzie's heart broke a little for his friend. Even though Mozzie had longed for knowing about his own parents for ages, he told himself that if his father was anything like James, just a tiny bit, he would never want to know about him. He would never want to face him. He knew how much Neal had wanted to learn about his father while growing up. How much he had hated him when he found out that James was a corrupt cop. And how much Neal had wished that James was actually a decent man, a man that he could call his father and have in his life when he finally found out who James really was.

But Mozzie also knew that from the moment James had left Neal's apartment after Pratt's death, Neal had wanted to bring his father to justice. Neal might be a criminal, but in Mozzie's eyes he was the only criminal with a heart. Even if he counted himself, too... However, sometimes that heart made decisions that brought Neal into trouble, and Mozzie deeply hoped that Neal would be able to disconnect his heart from his brain until the Feds had James in custody - otherwise... Mozzie could hardly think about it. He stared at the back of Neal's head and tried to convey a silent prayer to his friend.

*"Please, keep your head in the game, Neal. Don't put your life at stake to bring him down. He's not worth it.... James is not worth it!"*

A moment later Neal was hoisted to his feet, and both he and Mozzie were roughly escorted back to the house.

---

*"What do we do with them, boss?"*, Sean asked when they were all back in the house.

James had his back turned to the rest of them, and he simply pointed to the dining table and said:

*"We won't let them out of our sight. Secure them and get us some breakfast!"*

James never turned around, and Neal was actually glad he didn't have to face him, but if looks could kill, James would've been stabbed in the back more than once within the last 30 seconds. It had taken a lot of strength from Neal to pull himself together during the walk back to the house. He had blinked the tears away from his eyes and decided to hide those feelings in a box somewhere far away, where nobody would find it. Then he turned his focus back to everything that went on, everything that James said and did, everything that he could put in a report later that could be used in taking his used-to-be-father down. Every possible piece of evidence was cataloged in Neal's mind.

Mozzie and Neal were pushed into chairs on each side of the table, feet tied to the chair legs, and hands tied behind the back of the chair. Neal felt Greg pulling the zip ties tight and he was briefly reminded of his battered wrists.

He finally had the chance to study Mozzie more carefully. He seemed to be okay after his scary experience not that long ago, but Neal still asked him:

*“Are you okay, Mozz?”*

Mozzie gave Neal a little smirk, nodding slightly, clearly indicating that he was back to his usual self.

*“You know I don't take brutality for more than a less intelligent person's way of trying to communicate with our inner neanderthal, Neal”,* he stated matter-of-factly.

*“And this was a modern neanderthal's way of courting? Good thing, since dragging you by your hair would require a little more...”*, Neal commented, but he was cut short by James.

*“Shut up! Both of you”,* James yelled and added in a more normal voice: *“Did any of you find the missing phone? Did you frisk them?”*

James was obviously frustrated by the development of the whole situation, and Neal studied his emotions and reactions closely. He had hardly looked in their direction, and Neal interpreted that as James losing a bit of control. That could be to their advantage, but it most certainly could cause problems, too.

*“We didn't”,* Sean said, and only a second later both Neal and Mozzie were patted down in a less than gentle way.

Of course their captors didn't find the phone, and Neal wondered if the battery had run out, and if Peter and the rest of the team were on their way. He nodded to himself, almost invisible. Yeah, they were. He was sure. Well, almost sure... He hoped so, anyway.

*“What did you do with the phone?”*, Sean asked looking from Mozzie to Neal and back again.

*“What phone”,* asked Mozzie in his typical “I don't know what you're talking about”-way.

*“Where's the fucking phone? Who did you call?”*, Sean continued a little louder.

*“Don't bother”,* James said and finally looked directly at Neal while he continued. *“You called Agent Burke, didn't you? And left the phone out there some where for them to track the signal?”*

Neal locked gaze with James and with hatred in his voice, he simply stated:

*“The FBI is on their way and they'll be here soon!”*

James studied Neal for a moment. Neal did nothing but stare back, making sure not to

be the first one to look away.

*“No, they won't! It'll take them too long to track the signal, to find this exact place, to put together a team. It doesn't matter what they know, Neal, and you already know that. Remember, I used to be a cop. I know the process. Besides...”*

James looked at his watch and continued:

*“In about 3 hours we'll all be gone from here.”*

*“You won't get away with this”,* Neal said still looking at James. *“No matter what happens at 9, Peter knows that you did this, he knows all your names. He'll hunt you down.”*

*“Shut up, Neal... Peter might do a lot of things, but he doesn't do miracles. And you're gonna need one!”*, James said with an evil grin.

Then he turned away and headed for the kitchen.

*“Shut him up”*, he said to his people and waved his hand in the general direction of Neal and Mozzie. *“Shut them both up. I don't want to hear a peep from either of them.”*

Neal watched James walk away, enjoying the little victory that James had been the first to break the gaze.

*“If you're so sure of this, why don't you just tell me who will be here at 9?”*, Neal quickly asked and added: *“Or are you afraid of exposing too much, knowing that I'll find a way to pass on the information to Peter?”*

James stopped in the doorway, turned around and carefully watched Neal and Mozzie for a few seconds. Neal was sitting with his back towards James, but even being bound he had managed to turn around enough to see his father's reaction. Mozzie had been quiet during the entire conversation, but James could see him enjoying Neal's way of taunting him.

T had stepped up next to Mozzie, ripped off a piece of duct tape and threw the rest of the roll to Greg, before he placed the tape over Mozzie's mouth. Of course Mozzie tried to turn his head away, but it was to no avail. Neal didn't see any of this, he just kept looking at James.

*“Tell me... Dad!”*, Neal said and he couldn't hide the sound of hate in his voice when saying the last word.

Meanwhile Greg had ripped off a piece of duct tape, too, and quickly silenced Neal before he said anything else. It was a struggle for Neal to keep watching his father with Greg's hands on him, but he managed and he counted that as another little victory.

*“Eyes, too”*, James said, still standing in the doorway. *“They don't need to talk to communicate! I know them!”*

No, you don't, Neal thought. You don't know me at all! Then he heard the sound of duct tape being unrolled and a few seconds later the sight of his father turning around and



walking into the kitchen was taken from him, when Greg wrapped the tape around Neal's head, making sure that his eyes were well covered. Greg did a pretty good job, and soon Neal felt like being back in the dark room with no lights reaching his eyes at all, this time, though, still sensing people around him and being able to hear what was going on.

Neal bent his head a little, focusing on one of the senses he still had available and listened carefully to everything happening around him... Then it struck him. Shiiiiit, it's gonna hurt when the tape comes off. Duct tape and hair? He winced at the thought. Not a good combination. Not good at all. And for a moment he kind of wished that he had a no-hair-haircut like Mozzie or Jones.

---

Mozzie had been watching the interaction between Neal and James with satisfaction. It seemed like his silent prayer about Neal and his feelings had been heard by his friend, but he made a note to himself to pull a those feelings later, when all this was over with. Neal would need that, though he probably wouldn't admit to it. Mozzie added to his note to bring some whiskey to that talk - counterfeit or real, whatever would make Neal talk.

The only thing Mozzie regretted before he was blindfolded was that he hadn't been able to agree on some way of communication with Neal, but they would solve that issue along the road. You didn't need neither your voice, nor your eyes to communicate. James might think he knew them, but he clearly didn't. And anyway... The Feds were on their way, and they would... Wait a second?! Was he, Mozzie, actually rooting for the Feds? What was wrong with him beginning to rely this much on the FBI every time it had something to do with James? Once again Mozzie had to accept that pigs could fly, and Hell must have frozen over completely by now.

---

## CHAPTER 17

The previous hour had been more or less organized chaos in the White Collar office with everyone being busy coordinating, planning, researching, and tracking down the signal from the cell phone. Peter had spent almost 10 minutes on the phone trying to convince his bosses that they needed a helicopter to get up north in time. Though he couldn't really say what exactly would be happening at 9 AM, he had finally succeeded - Neal's text message had definitely been a great help on that account - and in about half an hour he, Diana, Jones and a couple of other agents would be heading for Beacon. Peter had sent off another team by car, and they had left the FBI building just a few minutes ago.

Diana came to Peter's office.

*"Boss, the local police force is ready to do whatever we ask them to, and they are looking into various possible places that Neal and Mozzie might be", she said.*

*"Thanks, Di!"* Peter appreciated her work.

*"Oh, and a S.W.A.T. team is getting ready, too",* she added with a smile on her face.

*"Perfect!",* Peter commented and continued: *"I just hope we find the exact location in time. Any updates from Jones?"*

*“Not yet, I’m afraid”*, Diana said, and before leaving the office she turned around and said:

*“But we’ll find them, Peter, we’ll find them!”*

Peter picked up his phone and dialed Elizabeth's number to give her a brief update on the situation and to let her know that they were going to Beacon - or at least somewhere close by. He also needed to hear her voice, her reassurances that they would make it in time, find Neal and Mozzie and bring down the kidnappers. Of course he couldn't tell her all the details, but she was just as anxious as he was, and she deserved to know about their progress.

Shortly after the conversation with Elizabeth, Peter, Diana, and Jones set off to South Street Seaport and then off to Beacon. Unfortunately, they had a minor set back before they even got on board the helicopter, when Peter got a phone call from the office telling him that the signal from the mobile had died - most likely the battery had run out - and they still didn't have an exact location. They had, however, narrowed the area down a little more to approximately 8 square miles of which most was forest. The information was passed on to the local police in Beacon as well, and when Peter and the team got there, they would hopefully be able to narrow it down even further.

Peter thought to himself that if they couldn't narrow it down by tracking the signal, they would simply have to think outside the box for a solution. He and Neal were used to doing that... Throwing ideas at one another and bringing up new ways of thinking. It was a problem, though, that the one person who usually helped Peter's thoughts and ideas evolve to creative solutions was the one they needed to find. At least Peter felt comfortable that Neal and Mozzie were okay since they had been able to actually call the FBI. Maybe they had gotten away on their own and were now just hiding out and waiting for the team to come and get them. If that was the case, Peter was sure that it would be a matter of time, before Neal and Mozzie would manage to send up another flare - so to speak - to let the FBI know where they were.

---

While figuring out a way to communicate with Neal, Mozzie was also busy counting minutes. He needed to know how much time they had to work with, but his inner watch had a hard time keeping up. Mozzie was not just physically exhausted - he was also mentally on the edge of his limits. He had been awake for about 24 hours now. Usually, he could handle that, easily - he and Neal both - but he just wasn't used to being kidnapped, having to escape, running through a forest and being re-captured like that.

Add to that the few slaps he had received to the back of his head on the two occasions so far where he had tried communicating with Neal - first by clearing his throat in Morse code, and the second time by tapping his foot on the floor - he was simply drained.

One moment Mozzie was still counting minutes, 37 so far, the next he almost jerked awake. He had zoned out. He listened to the men around him, trying to figure out if they were still talking about the same things he had registered before dozing off. Nope... They were actually pretty quiet at the moment. They had definitely finished eating their breakfast, and the smell of bacon that had made Mozzie's stomach growl earlier, seemed to have left the room again. Mozzie deduced that either he had actually been asleep for a while or they had let in some fresh air. The room didn't seem cooler,

though, so Mozzie doubted that was the reason, hence he had no idea now how much time had passed. He cursed himself for falling asleep, yet the thing he wanted the most right now - except of course from getting out of here - was to sleep. Maybe he needed to do so to clear his head, to gain his strength and be ready for the next round of captors versus prisoners.

Mozzie sighed inwardly and tried listening for any sounds coming from Neal. Nothing. Maybe Neal had reached the same conclusion. Mozzie gave in, relaxed his body as much as possible in the situation and actually ended up appreciating the ties holding him, because at least they would assure that he didn't fall off the chair in his sleep. Soon he nodded off.

---

Neal had smiled to himself every time Mozzie had tried communicating. He also winced on Mozzie's behalf when he heard the obvious sounds of slaps. For a few seconds he actually thought that the foot tapping had worked, because Mozzie had managed to spell two whole words, before he was caught in doing that.

Neal had been listening to all that had been said and done after they were blindfolded, but nothing had been particularly useful. Their captors had made breakfast, and whatever they talked about was of no importance. One time he had heard James call Sean to the kitchen, but the door had been closed so whatever that was about, Neal and Mozzie weren't supposed to hear it.

Mozzie had gone silent for a while. He had probably fallen asleep. Neal wished he could do the same, but his feet, his wrists and his shoulders were aching, and he didn't intend to just sit and wait for the time to hit 9 AM. He tried wriggling his hands a little, and with one finger he could reach the seat of the chair. He tried scratching with a nail, very briefly. It did make a faint sound, but not enough for anyone but Neal to hear. He figured that he could easily create a louder sound by scratching harder, but as of now he would hold back on that option. No need to reveal a possible way of communicating if Mozzie was asleep.

Instead he spent his time observing and counting minutes. He tried to let his body relax, just a little. Even though his mind was still racing, it wouldn't hurt if his body would recover a bit, and rest was probably the best solution. After almost an hour according to Neal's counting, everyone around him seemed to be either dosing off or at least doing quiet things on their own. He also felt quite sure that some of the men had left the room. No one had moved around for a while, no one said anything, and the only sound Neal had recognized during the last few minutes was someone turning pages in a book or something.

A couple of minutes later Neal heard one of the men get up and come closer. He pulled out the chair next to Neal and sat down. He didn't say anything and didn't do anything else. Neal didn't move. He pretended to be sleeping, breathing slowly.

*"What are you doing, man?"*, a voice from across the room asked. Neal recognized it as the man from the park, Sean.

*"Just observing"*, Greg said next to him.

*"Observing?"*, Sean asked puzzled.

*“What did this guy do to piss off the boss enough for him to do this?” Greg continued: “I mean... they are family, father and son.”*

When hearing these words, Neal couldn't hold back a little reaction. The words stung, and Greg noticed.

*“Oooh... I think, he's awake”,* Greg said.

*“He better be”,* Sean commented.

Neal felt a finger poking at his cheek. At first he didn't bother, but when Greg kept going, he finally moved his head away.

*“Yup, definitely awake! Daddy's boy was faking”,* Greg teased and kept poking at Neal until he couldn't move away any further.

Oh, stop that, Neal thought. Greg was like a little, annoying child trying to cause an outburst from the person he was teasing. After a few minutes with returning pokes on his cheek and nose, and Greg running a tickling finger down Neal's neck, Neal had a hard time trying not to react. If he hadn't been bound, he for sure would have lashed out at Greg, pulling his hand away or something worse. But Neal was stuck and he couldn't even turn his back to the guy. In the end Neal couldn't help himself, and he started squirming in the chair and pulling at his bonds, but all he got from Greg was laughing.

*“Cut it out, Greg”,* Sean said.

*“But this is fun, I've got nothing else to do and boss told us to keep him awake”,* Greg argued.

Neal heard Sean get up and approach them, and shortly after Greg's hand was caught mid-poking and Sean told him to stop or he would break his finger. Neal rejoiced.

Of course Neal should have known that Sean wasn't just interrupting Greg's teasing to make Neal more comfortable, which Neal realized the moment he felt his head being pulled back by the hair, and he heard Sean's firm voice:

*“And you... I'll be watching you. And if you show signs of falling asleep, I'll let Greg poke and prod at you, or I'll...”,* Sean paused, let Neal go and moved away a bit.

Neal could hear shuffling, like someone was looking for something, and then Sean's voice from the kitchen behind him:

*“Where's the taser?”,* he asked.

*“How the hell should I know?”,* Greg answered, and Neal heard him get up and join Sean in the kitchen.

Neal hastily cleared his throat, but he got no reaction from Mozzie. Come on, Mozz! This is our chance - they're not here, Neal pleaded in his mind, but he could hear the heavy breathing from Mozzie, clearly indicating that his friend was asleep.

It didn't take long, before both Sean and Greg came back.

*"But we frisked them both",* he heard Greg say.

*"I know, but where else would it be?"*, Sean asked, and then Neal felt him grab a handful of his hair once again.

Neal was seriously getting tired of people messing with his hair, and he once again considered getting a buzz cut as soon as this was all over, because that would most definitely make it harder for people to pull at his hair in the future.

*"You took it, right?"*, Sean hissed. *"You or your little friend over there! But I have other ways to keep you awake. I promise you that!"*

He let go of Neal's hair, and Neal breathed a sigh of relief. It must have been Mozzie who took the taser, which Neal appreciated very much. He had had enough close encounters with that evil tool.

After that little dispute, Greg and Sean let Neal be for a while, and everything fell quiet again. Neal had lost count on the minutes, and slowly he felt himself feeling more and more exhausted. He started to dose off, but he had hardly taken one step towards Dreamland, before he felt someone slapping him on the back behind his shoulders. At the same time he felt a stinging pain. Ouch!

*"You aren't sleeping, are you boy?"*, Sean gripped Neal's left shoulder and shook him slightly.

Neal could still feel a sting in the upper part of his back. What the hell was that? Not that it was unbearable, but it was definitely not pleasant either.

*"I asked you a question",* Sean asked and moved his hand to Neal's back, and he felt the stinging more intensely.

*"You weren't sleeping, right?"*, Sean repeated.

Neal shook his head. Even if had been half asleep, he was as awake as he could be right now. Sean continued patting Neal's back and shoulder, and whatever it was that stung, he made sure to touch it over and over.

*"Oh, I totally forgot about the pin in my hand when I .. caressed you",* Sean said with an obvious smirk in his voice.

He pulled out the pin, and Neal winced a little. Sean put a finger over the spot and Neal felt a slight pressure.

*"Oh, good... pretty much no blood. No one will notice that. I bet you hardly noticed either, right?"*, he added and squeezed Neal's shoulder once more.

In his mind Neal cursed at Sean, and yet again he sent up a silent prayer for Peter to come find him... find them... soon. He just wanted this to be over with, and he would love for that to be before 9 AM. Right now he had no clue how far away 9 AM was, but he hoped that Peter was closer. Right, Neal... Comparing time with distance. Get your head

in the game now, he told himself. He and Mozzie had been in trouble before, but it just seemed like this time was one of the more difficult ones to get out of without help. Usually, Neal would praise himself for being able to find his own way out of problems, but this time was different. He and Mozzie were both outnumbered, their captors knew a lot about them and their skills, and if they had underestimated Mozzie earlier, they definitely didn't do that now. To be honest, Neal couldn't see how they could get out of this on their own as the situation was at the moment. He would have to either wait for the situation to change... or make it change himself?? Hmm...

An idea started to form in Neal's head. The only question was if Greg and Sean would buy it...

---

## CHAPTER 18

A few minutes after the helicopter had taken off, a call came in from the FBI offices. Both Peter, Diana and Jones were able to listen in on the call coming through the intercom in the headphones, and it didn't take many seconds before the expressions on their faces changed.

*"We got another lead!"*, the agent from the office said.

He relayed the new information as quickly as possible. For hours the tech team had been working on tracking down Neal's phone from the brief connection Peter had made shortly after Neal's anklet alarm went off. It hadn't been easy, because the signal seemed to be on and off and moving. Finally it appeared that it had stopped, but it was still very unstable. The location was a junkyard in Edenwald and a team was already on its way to scout out the area.

*"Let's hope they find something"*, Diana said, and Peter agreed.

*"It's just so far away from Beacon"*, Peter mused and continued. *"It seems a little odd."*

*"How soon will the team be there?"*, Jones asked.

*"In a few minutes actually. They'll call you as soon as they have more information"*, the agent explained. They disconnected the call, and they all looked at each other with hope shining in their eyes.

The three of them were picked up by a local police officer as soon as they arrived to Beacon. On their way to the station Peter got a call from one of the agents in New York. He had been waiting anxiously for the phone to ring, and as he answered, he almost held his breath in anticipation.

*"Agent Burke, Sir"*, the voice on the other end said. *"We found the phone in a trash can. It's partly smashed, but we're quite sure it's Mr. Caffrey's."*

Peter was about to ask if they had checked it for prints already, but he never got that far. The agent on the phone continued:

*"We spotted a black van similar to the one from the surveillance cameras, parked outside the junkyard."*

As it turned out the agents on the scene had more luck than anyone would have thought would ever happen. A man had been about to leave the junkyard in the suspicious van, the agents had interjected, and the guy was now in custody and on his way to the office for interrogation. He had appeared awfully nervous as soon as the agents had shown their identification and asked to talk to him, and even though the agents never mentioned the phone to the guy, he had commented on it the same second he noticed an agent passing by with the phone in an evidence bag.

Peter couldn't help moving around in the passenger seat, and the officer driving the car cast him a glance.

*"It's always a tough job to track down leads - and even worse when you really would want to track them all down yourself, right?"*, he said.

Peter agreed, but he trusted all the agents to do a good job. Even though he would have liked to be there himself, he also knew that going up north was the right decision. Unless the tracking of the phone call from Neal and Mozzie was way off (which he doubted very much), they were somewhere in this area, and finding the two of them was after all more important than finding Neal's phone - even if the first depended on the latter.

Peter and his team arrived to the local police station in Beacon, set up what Jones called their "command post", and briefed the local officers on their strategy. Peter had a hard time concealing his eagerness after the phone call, but both his team and the local officers were looking into this guy, Daniel McCullen, the junkyard, any known partners and so on.

The local police officers were also putting together a list of possible and interesting places that the kidnapers could be holding Neal and Mozzie captives. Peter was thrilled, they were finally getting somewhere, yet he did his best to stay calm. They were not there yet. They still had to find Neal and Mozzie, and time was running out. They only had about an hour before the clock hit 9 AM. He looked up and caught Diana watching him.

*"We're gonna find them, Boss. Told you so!"*, she smiled big.

*"1 hour, Diana. That's all we've got"*, Peter stated, but he couldn't help smiling, too.

---

Neal started fidgeting, squirming in the chair. Slowly at first, then more. His breathing became more ragged, and he switched between leaning his head backwards and leaning his chin against his chest. It didn't take long before Sean noticed that something was going on.

*"Hey! What're you doing?"*, he said, getting up from the couch.

Neal heard him come closer, but he didn't react to Sean's question. He pulled at his bonds instead, wriggling his hands.

*"Stop it!"*, Sean raised his voice and grabbed a hold of Neal's chin, but Neal shook his head a little more frantically. He was breathing quickly now, and he actually started

sweating, too.

*“What’s going on?”*, Greg asked, sounding a little nervous.

*“I said stop it!”*, Sean repeated and held on to Neal’s chin with a more firm grip.

Using the other hand he pushed down on Neal’s left shoulder trying to steady him by pushing him back in the chair. He hardly registered Greg approaching. Neal kept shaking his head, trying to get out of Sean’s grip, kept pulling at his bonds, and he made a few indistinct noises.

*“Where’s the fucking taser, when you need it?”*, Greg said from somewhere very close to Neal.

*“If you don’t stop this shit right away, I’ll fucking knock you out not caring about your old man’s orders”*, Sean almost growled, having difficulties making Neal sit still.

But Neal just kept going. Wriggling, pulling, shaking. He actually ripped open the skin on his wrists, but he didn’t notice. He hardly felt any pain. He did feel a little dizzy, though.

---

Mozzie woke up feeling a little confused at first, but quickly got his bearings and realized that something was going on. Something regarding Neal. He listened carefully, trying to figure out what was happening.

Mon frère, what are you doing? Don’t provoke them, Mozzie thought. It sounded like Neal, Sean and Greg were struggling, but how could that be?

---

*“Hold his head”*, Sean ordered, and quickly Greg had his arm around Neal’s neck and one hand on his forehead, holding him tight against his own body.

Sean placed a hand on both of Neal’s shoulders, but just as he once again told Neal to stop it, Neal groaned, took a deep breath and went completely limp.

*“What the fuck!?”*, Greg sounded puzzled, surprised that from having to use a lot of force to try to keep Neal still he suddenly didn’t have to do anything at all.

He released his grip, and if Neal hadn’t been tied to the chair, he would have fallen to the floor in a pile of seemingly boneless limbs with nothing to hold him upright.

Sean tapped Neal’s cheek, not too gently. With a hand on his chin he shook Neal’s head a little.

*“Hey, Neal - you didn’t think I’d fall for this little act”*, he laughed a little.

Sean let go of Neal’s chin and his hand moved to rest over Neal’s chest instead.

*“You should’ve...”*, Sean paused for a moment pressing his hand harder on Neal’s chest.  
*“What the hell?”*



*"What?"*, Greg asked.

*"He's not... I don't think he's breathing"*, Sean said, sounding a little more insecure.

He tapped Neal's cheek again. No reaction. Then he slapped him harder. No reaction.

Sean stuck his hand in one of his pockets, fumbled for something and then pulled out the pin from earlier, gave Greg a slightly evil smile, and promptly pushed the pin into Neal's thigh. No reaction.

*"He's just holding his breath"*, Greg stated with a slight shake of his head.

*"How long can you hold your breath?"*, Sean asked him, voice raised.

*"I don't know"*, Greg said, *"30 seconds, a minute? Why?"*

*"It's been longer than that"*, Sean said, ripped off the tape from Neal's mouth and added: *"You got your knife? Cut him loose! Get him on the floor."*

---

Mozzie was pulling at his bonds. The zip ties on his hands were tight, though, but if Neal was in trouble, he sure as hell had to do something. And if this was part of a plan that he was unaware of, Mozzie was definitely doing his part in this. No matter what, he needed to catch the attention of their abductors. He needed to get free.

---

Greg quickly got out his knife, cut the bonds holding Neal to the chair, and supported by Sean's grip, Neal's body pretty much slid to the floor.

*"Hold him down"*, Sean ordered.

*"Why?"*, Greg asked puzzled. *"If he's unconscious..."*

*"Just do it!"*, Sean yelled.

Greg complied, put one hand on Neal's chest and one on his upper left arm, and Sean started pulling off the duct tape from Neal's eyes, halfway expecting Neal to stare back at him when they were freed. But Neal's eyes were closed.

*"I can feel his heart"*, Greg said. *"It's beating, and it's beating very fast."*

*"He hasn't breathed for almost a couple of minutes - it's working hard to pump around whatever oxygen is left"*, Sean explained.

At the same time James stalked into the living room, with T following shortly after.

*"Why the hell are you two yel..."*, James started, but stopped at the sight of Neal on the floor with Sean and Greg halfway hovering over him, halfway holding him down.

*"He had a seizure or something"*, Sean started explaining. *"He has stopped breathing!"*

James and T both crossed the room and crouched down next to the others. James felt for Neal's pulse. It was there, and it was fast.

*"For how long?"*, James asked.

*"A couple of minutes"*, Sean answered.

James studied Neal closely for a moment. Watched his chest that still didn't move. Then he went to the kitchen, came back with a flashlight, pulled up Neal's eyelids one after the other and checked his pupils. He forced open Neal's mouth and seemingly checked his tongue.

Then he looked at Mozzie, who appeared slightly agitated. James slowly rose to his feet, walked calmly to the other side of the table, ripped off the tape from Mozzie's mouth and said in an even voice:

*"Mozzie... How long can Neal hold his breath?"*

*"Ow!"*, Mozzie said even though it hadn't hurt that much when James ripped off the tape.

Mozzie had been working his jaw enough that he had been able to push his tongue through his teeth, wet his lips and loosen the tape a little.

*"You gotta help him. I can help him. Get me loose and I can do CPR, please"*, Mozzie pleaded, squirmed in the chair and pulled at his bonds even more.

James sighed deeply: *"How long can Neal hold his breath, Mozz?"*

*"I don't know"*, Mozzie said annoyed. *"We need to help him. He's your son!"*

*"Your acting skills are lacking, Mozzie"*, James simply stated. *"A person can fake a lot of things, but you can't fake your body's reaction to certain things."*

James walked back towards Neal and picked up Greg's knife from the floor.

*"It's almost 9 AM anyway"*, he said and held out the knife in front of the others.

*"One of you... Cut his throat!"*, James ordered.

The other three quickly shared glances, but none of them moved. Greg was still holding onto Neal.

*"Any one of you"*, James continued.

*"You want us to kill Neal?"*, T asked surprised.

*"Of course not! Him I need..."*, James replied and pointed at Mozzie. *"But we don't need him anymore."*

Mozzie tried to swallow, but his mouth had suddenly gone extremely dry.

James was still holding the knife in his outstretched hand.

*"I think this is a job for you, Greg"*, James said and held the knife in Greg's direction.

*"Greg... Don't!"*, Sean whispered.

*"Now, Greg - unless you aren't the right guy for the job!"*, James said.

Greg slowly reached for the knife, but Sean put his hand on Greg's arm.

*"Don't do this Greg, you're not a murderer!"*, he said.

*"Shut up, Sean"*, James growled, looked directly at Greg and continued: *"Are you a coward?"*

Greg stood up and stared back at James. *"I'm no coward!"*

Then he took the knife from James, walked to stand behind Mozzie before he took a deep breath to steady himself.

---

## CHAPTER 19

Peter was on the phone with his people back at the White Collar office, and as Diana was watching him intensely she could see that he was getting good news. As soon as Peter hung up, he stormed into the conference room where they had set up a temporary office.

*"He broke!"*, he exclaimed, wiped his face with one hand, and almost did a 365 rotation on the spot.

And then Peter was back in the game, 100%. It had been a while since he had looked this focused, and his eyes were steadfast when he summed up the information he had received from their colleagues.

*"Daniel McCullen"*, he said, *"is hardly a seasoned criminal. He and another small-timer were hired by his cousin Sean Williams to help kidnap Neal and Mozzie from Southpoint Park yesterday. Mozzie actually got away, before they managed to grab Neal, but in the end they got them both, drove them to a meeting place just outside the city where this guy..."*

Peter clicked to open a picture in an email, he had just received.

*"... Sean Williams"*

He turned around his laptop for everyone to see the screen.

*"... had Neal and Mozzie transferred to another van, and he drove off alone, apparently heading up here."*

Peter looked around the room, noticing that each and every one of his own people as well as the local officers were all listening carefully, taking notes, and all looking about

as ready to jump up and run out the door to slap cuffs on the guy, as he himself was.

*“Jones”, Peter started barking out orders, “find out everything about this Sean Williams guy.”*

*“Already on it”,* said Jones, tapping away on his own computer.

*“We need to find any connection to this area, his possible accomplices, any previous connection to Neal and/or Mozzie”,* Peter continued.

Jones had already found a little piece of extra information that might be important, and he, too, turned around his computer to show everyone another picture.

*“Sean has a brother, Gregory... Mentally ill, has been in and out of institutions, schizophrenic or something.”*

Jones turned his laptop back around and continued reading, halfway aloud, halfway mumbling to himself, while the others set off to do various tasks, following up on this major breakthrough they had finally made.

*“Oh, man”,* Jones whispered to himself, but Diana still heard him.

*“What? What's up?”*, she asked.

*“Greg is... Greg is a psycho!”*, Jones simply stated.

Peter noticed that Jones looked slightly alarmed, which worried him a little. Please, don't tell me something bad now, he thought. Not now... Not when we're finally making progress. Yet, when Jones did continue, Peter's stomach churned.

As it turned out, Sean and Gregory Williams were very close, and for many years Sean had been the one taking care of Greg when he was not institutionalized. If Greg was “the Greg” who was a part of this kidnapping case, they would have to take precautions. A lot of precautions.

Greg had done time - more than once actually. One time he had seduced a girl in a bar, spent a week bringing her gifts, waiting on her whenever they were together, until one day when she had told him that she really wasn't looking for a boyfriend at the time. He had snapped completely and beaten the shit out of the poor girl.

Another time, when Gregory and Sean were younger, he was arrested for stabbing a school mate, but he had gotten away with it, because Sean had stepped in and testified that Greg had been attacked by the other boy, and in the end the boy decided not to press charges. The police had suspected that Sean had threatened the boy, but they had no proof.

Jones also found a report from a mental institution that listed several incidents clearly stating that you never knew, how Greg would react. He had been observed taking care of an abandoned kitten, a kitten that he never harmed in any way. But he had also been caught in trying to bribe a friend into letting him break one of his fingers, simply because Greg wanted to know the sound of a bone snapping.

Peter felt the chills run down his spine.

They were used to handle white collar criminals, mostly non-violent, and this... This was so out of their comfort zone.

Peter quickly decided that they would need assistance from a psychiatrist or maybe a doctor specializing in mental illnesses. They would work from the theory that Sean and Greg were working together and they needed someone who could help them decipher any reactions from Greg, someone who could help them predict what he would do next.

The entire team was busy working the new leads, trying to find the right location and connecting the pieces in the puzzle. They still missed quite a few - the most important ones were the why and the where.

Peter checked his watch... 8:25... They were running out of time!

---

Neal's mind was swirling on the edge of consciousness. He craved air. He wanted to breath. He so desperately needed to breath. He kept reminding himself about the techniques he had studied and learned for the boiler room scam he and Peter had solved years back.

It had been tough not to react to any of the pain Sean had inflicted on him, but when James had his hands all over him and even in his mouth, Neal had experienced the biggest challenge ever in constraining himself.

He had aimed for Sean and Greg releasing him during the "seizure", and panicking when they found out he wasn't breathing. The first part worked out alright, the second part not quite.

Neal listened intently to things going on around him. He heard James speak to Mozzie, he heard Mozzie feigning desperation about Neal's apparent health issues, but he also recognized the indifference in his father's voice when he asked Greg to kill Mozzie. He felt Greg's hands leave him.

"*I'm no coward*", he heard Greg say, though it was in a voice that Neal barely recognized.

He would have expected Mozzie to start rambling, but everyone in the room was dead silent.

Neal came to a realization, and cracked open a tiny slit of an eye. Everyone seemed to stare at Mozzie, almost oblivious to Neal's presence. Sean was crouched down on Neal's right side, T and James standing on the other. He noticed the flashlight next to him, and slowly snaked his fingers around the handle. He only had a few seconds to save Mozzie.

Neal released his breath with a loud gasp, naturally catching the attention of everyone around him, and he sprung into action. With a firm grip on the flashlight he lashed out at Sean, hit him hard on the side of the head, scrambled to his feet, jumped up on the chair and from there onto the table. That made Greg react, and in the same second as he got ready to slide the knife across Mozzie's throat, Neal attacked, like a hunting animal, taking advantage of the force coming from him being in a position towering over

Greg. They tumbled over. Both were fighting for control of the knife, which Greg amazingly enough had managed to hold on to.

He felt the adrenaline flooding his body, all the anger he had withheld since he found out that his father was behind the abduction. The rage was boiling in Neal, and this time he didn't try to constrain himself. He fought, and he fought hard. At one point Greg dropped the knife, and Neal followed up the success by sending a fist towards his jaw, hard enough to incapacitate the man who had been about to kill Neal's best friend.

The entire fight lasted only a few seconds, and as soon as Greg stilled, Neal reached for the knife, turned around and slit the zip ties from Mozzie's hands.

But that was all he had time to do, before both T and James were on him. However, Neal wasn't done fighting yet, and the adrenaline and the anger combined made up for a powerful and dangerous animal that was hard to hold back, even when they were two against one.

There was no doubt that both James and T were hit during the fight. Neal saw his knuckles bruise, saw his father's nose start bleeding, but Neal never felt any pain. He just felt anger. A lot of anger.

---

Mozzie had silently been preparing himself to bid farewell to the world he had come to love, when he heard the loud gasp. He smiled to himself, knowing that Neal would never stop conning people - even if Mozzie would no longer be around to be the Devil on his shoulder.

But Mozzie never had time to prepare himself any further, because within seconds he felt a foot hit his upper arm, and then heard Greg and - he suspected - Neal tumble over. After a brief commotion Mozzie's hands were suddenly released, and he quickly tore off the duct tape from his eyes, freed his feet and tried to get an overview of the situation.

Neal's rage was obvious to Mozzie, and he didn't blame his friend for reacting that way. The last 24 hours had been the world's biggest emotional roller coaster for Neal.

Mozzie briefly scanned the room for his glasses, but they were no where to see. He did see Sean unconscious on the floor, though, and Greg was pulling himself up right next to him. Mozzie grabbed the chair he had been tied to just moments ago. With all the force he could muster, he slammed the chair into Greg. It hardly broke, and for a second Mozzie was stunned that he was still holding a mostly intact chair in his hands.

Greg was moaning on the floor, but didn't seem to feel like getting back up right away, and Mozzie's focus was directed at the fight between Neal, James and T.

Neal had never been much of a fighter, but even though he appeared slim, he was strong. He kept fit and was all muscle, and for a second Mozzie admired his friend's fearless battle, but two against one - and one of those two being a heavily built, almost 6.6 feet tall "monster" - was unfair, and soon to be a lost battle.

Mozzie held his very alternative, yet apparently strong and effective weapon, high. He took aim. Ready to take a swing at T, Mozzie took a deep breath, and... A shot was fired!

Mozzie froze immediately. He felt an intense pain in his right side, dropped the chair and fell to the floor, gasping.

---

The S.W.A.T. team and the rest of the agents who went to Beacon by car had arrived not that long ago. Everyone was ready to move as soon as the order came.

Diana, Jones and not least Peter had pulled every string they knew, forced everyone to work the fastest they had ever worked. They hadn't been able to place James in the picture, but they had found a connection between Sean and a guy, called Tyson Banks, aka T. Having faces to put on all the four names, Neal had listed in the text message, gave them a better possibility to prepare the rescue operation.

With 10 minutes left to 9 AM, they finally had a location. Not a location that they knew for sure would be the right one, but it was a very safe bet.

It was an old property registered in the name of Sean's and Greg's father, who had passed away years back leaving the house to his wife. However, she had not wanted to stay there and had moved out shortly after her husband's death, but the house was never sold. It was located very close by within the triangulated area that the cell phone signal had pointed out.

The clock was ticking. 9 minutes... The drive to the address in question would usually be about 15-20 minutes, the officers told them.

*"Gear up!"*, Peter said.

The S.W.A.T. team was en route, and Peter, Jones and Diana were suiting up in bullet proof vests.

8 minutes.

They threw themselves in the first car leaving the station. Local police squads had been directed to the area. The closest being about 10 minutes away.

7 minutes.

The police officer behind the wheel was flooring it. Sirens and lights were on.

6 minutes, 9 miles to go.

They were all checking the radios, testing, testing.

*"No one enters before S.W.A.T. is ready"*, Peter told them.

Peter took a look at his watch, 8:55... 5 minutes.

*"We're not going to make it before 9 AM"*, he stated. *"Let's hope they are delayed in whatever is about to happen!"*

*"We can't keep going with this speed"*, the officer said. *"The road is too small, too many curves."*

*"Just go as fast as you can!"*, Peter said.

4 minutes...

---

## CHAPTER 20

It seemed like suddenly time stood still. Everyone froze. Neal with one fist ready to hit T square in the face, but at the same time with his father's hand gripping onto his left arm. T had a hand on Neal's chest trying to keep him at arm's length to avoid Neal's fist. For any people watching it must have looked like someone pressed pause on a movie, the second the shot sounded.

*"STOP!"*, someone yelled in a very authoritative voice.

To Neal it sounded like someone far away, but it was enough to wake him from his frozen state, and his eyes quickly found Mozzie kneeling with one hand on the floor and one hand pressed to his right side.

*"Mozz!"*, Neal screamed, pulling away from his father, almost dragging James along. He still had a tight grip on Neal's arm, but Neal was too strong and too intent on getting to Mozzie that even James couldn't hold him back.

*"Bennet! What is going on here?"*, an unknown male voice said loudly.

James let go of Neal's arm. As he dropped to the floor next to Mozzie and put a caring arm carefully on his friend's back, Neal felt the slight pressure of a gun on his neck. He slowly turned to look over his left shoulder, never letting his hand leave Mozzie's back.

For the first time, Neal saw the man with the gun. He didn't know him, but he looked muscular, well-trained. His attention shifted to James standing close by, reaching out to shake hands with a second man, who Neal didn't know either. Still, he somehow seemed familiar.

*"Mr. Turner!"*, James said, *"Glad you could make it. Just a minor issue - we got it under control."*

Neal's stomach dropped! Turner? No, it couldn't be. It had to be a coincidence. Before he had time to think more about the name, Neal's attention returned to Mozzie who moaned loudly. With the help of Neal, he laid down on his left side, his face contorted in pain.

Neal could see blood from a wound under the hand that Mozzie desperately held to a spot in his side, right below his rib cage. He was just about to reach over and put pressure on the wound when he heard James' voice.

*"Get up, Neal!"*, he ordered.

Without even shooting him a glance, Neal completely ignored the command from his father, and instead he put his right hand over Mozzie's and begun to put on pressure. Mozzie groaned from the extra pain.



Neal heard the cocking of the gun.

*“Get up, he said!”*

The man with the gun repeated the words of his father before Neal felt himself being roughly pulled away from Mozzie by two sets of hands.

*“I’ll be okay”,* he heard Mozzie whisper.

*“He’s really not good at following orders”,* T - one of the guys who hoisted Neal to his feet - said to the man holding the gun. Neal noticed that the other guy was Greg. He sported some nice, bleeding bruises on his face from the punches that Neal had managed to get in during their brief fight.

*“Is that him?”,* Mr. Turner said.

He gave Neal a quick once over and without getting an answer to his question, he continued:

*“I thought I told you that I wanted him without visible bruises?”*

James shrugged: *“Yeah, well... Neal has a hard time obeying other people, and as you saw we did just have a slight issue”.*

*“I guess I see why she likes him, feisty and all, though I still don’t understand her reasons for sure”,* Turner said while looking at James. *“What you don’t do for your kids, right? Rach always gets what she wants.”*

*“Your kids make you do strange things once in a while”,* James chuckled.

Neal glared at his father in total disbelief. Rach? Turner?

*“You’re Rebec... Rachel’s father!”*, he stated, looking at the newcomer.

*“Indeed I am”,* Mr. Turner smirked. *“And you’re Neal Caffrey! I’m glad to see that Bennet came through on his word that he could deliver you at a fair price.”*

*“What do you want from me?”,* Neal asked.

*“Shut up, Neal!”*, James growled, and to Mr. Turner he said:

*“Let’s get this over with. You’ve got my papers?”*

*“I do”,* Turner said and signaled to his guy with the gun, who quickly pulled out an envelope from his jacket pocket. He handed the envelope to James.

After a quick scan at the contents, James reached out to shake Mr. Turner’s hand once again. Neal couldn’t help himself.

*“Is that what I’m worth to you, DAD? Papers that you can get on the street for a few thousand bucks? Papers that I could’ve created in less than a day?”*

“Dad?”, Mr. Turner looked puzzled.

“Oh, he didn't tell you?”, Neal continued. *“He didn't tell you that he doesn't care shit about what happens to his own flesh and blood? Well, I guess I shouldn't be surprised... He sees me as less as his son as I see him as my father.”*

“You get a new identity by handing me over to a murderer? To a crazy lunatic of a woman who was ready to kill me for a diamond?”, Neal stared at James with hatred in his eyes.

“Don't you talk that way about my daughter!”, Rachel's father said and stepped closer to Neal. *“She might want you - for whatever obscure reason - but I will NOT refrain from punishment if you don't behave or if you call my daughter names like that again.”*

Neal ignored Turner and looked into James' eyes.

“Tell me your new name! Tell me!”, Neal almost yelled. *“I dare you to tell me... You know I'm gonna hunt you down. I'm gonna get you for all you did. For killing Pratt, for framing Peter, for betraying Ellen, for...”*

“SHUT UP, you little piece of...”, James yelled, but restrained himself, before addressing Turner again.

“You got what you wanted. Nice to do business with you. Now get him out of here, out of my sight”, James said, waved a hand in the general direction of Neal and turned his back to all of them.

“How do you want him?”, T asked Turner.

Both he and Greg still held a tight grip on Neal.

“I actually expected him to be restrained already”, Turner said and pulled out a set of hand cuffs from the back of his pants.

“Cuffs won't hold him”, James stated matter-of-factly. *“Expect Neal to be able to pick any lock you present to him with nothing more than a strand of hair.”*

Inside Neal smirked... Even though it came from his “used-to-be father”, this was still a compliment. An example of Neal's skills, and one that he was rather proud of. James probably never realized that.

Turner looked at the handcuffs for a moment.

“I got a solution for that in the car, but until then...”, he slapped the cuff around first one of Neal's wrists, pulled him around in a smooth movement that seemed to surprise not only Neal, but also T and Greg, and then cuffed the other wrist.

“... these will have to do”, Turner finished and tightened the cuffs as much as possible.

Neal winched and hissed, when the cuffs dug into his already bruised and sore wrists. He had been cuffed numerous times before, but this was the first time it felt like all blood

circulation was immediately cut off.

*"I got him",* Turner's goon said and gripped Neal's right arm.

He pointed the gun in Neal's face and started marching him towards the door. As the very last thing before being almost dragged out of the room, Neal caught sight of Mozzie. He was still lying on the floor next to the dining table. He hadn't moved at all, and since he had said nothing during the entire commotion with Rachel's father, Neal suspected that he had lost consciousness. He just hoped that Mozzie would be okay. He didn't care about what would happen to himself from now on, as long as Mozzie would be alright. Neal silently prayed for his friend. Even though he wasn't a firm believer it never hurt to ask even the God of Criminals to take care of his friend. Mozzie had been dragged into the whole situation simply by being Neal's friend. He didn't deserve any of this!

Neal was roughly pushed inside a large black SUV, and as soon as he was inside he realized that it was definitely no normal SUV. It had various computer equipment and instead of the middle row of seats were a table, but before Neal had time to study it all further, Rachel's father climbed in from the other side.

From a compartment below the seat Turner pulled out a syringe and two vials. He placed both of them on the table.

*"Now... I can give you a neuromuscular-blocking drug, paralyzing your muscles with the risk of you not being able to breath on your own",* he pulled out further medical equipment, an incubation tube among other things.

*"Or I can give you a sedative and strap you down. What do you choose?"*

Neal didn't really like any of those options. He actually hated all the options he had been giving the last 24 hours. When would someone start offering interesting choices, useful choices? Choices that included escape options?

*"How about I just buckle up, sit still and enjoy the drive?"*, Neal gave his most convincing smile.

*"I don't trust you to do just that. Besides... They said you need to learn how to obey. Choose!",* Turner simply said.

*"You really don't wanna drug me. I don't do well with drugs",* Neal explained.

*"Oh, I've got many types of drugs. I'm sure I can find something to help you get rid of possible side effects."*

Turner pulled out a third vial...

*"In case you get constipation, I can give you this and help get your system running again pretty fast".*

Turner's man got in the driver's seat, turned around and threw a bunch of straps and a few chains into the back.

*"What you requested, Sir. Let me know when we're ready to go",* he said.

Turner looked at Neal.

*“Choose, or I'll give you all three of them!”*

Neal gulped.

*“Sedative”*, he said hesitantly eyeing the incubation tube with disgust. No way he would voluntarily choose that.

Turner didn't say a word, but simply ripped the wrapping from the syringe and started preparing the injection. Neal thought of the huge needle that nurse “Ratchet” had used on him back in the Howser Clinic. At least this one was far from that size, but he suspected the drug to be of the same kind.

A few seconds later, Turner stuck the needle in Neal's upper arm, pushed the plunger, and soon Neal felt it sting and a warming sensation quickly spread from the arm to the rest of his body.

He leaned back in the seat as much as possible with his hands cuffed behind his back, but it didn't take long before Turner pushed him forward and unlocked the cuffs. After that Neal wasn't really sure of what happened, except that his wrists were strapped to his legs, his feet were strapped together, and 3 versions of Turner strapped his upper body to the seat with something looking like a thousand black straps.... or were they snakes? Neal wasn't completely sure. His head started spinning.

Somewhere - a hundred miles away - someone said *“Let's go!”*. Neal wondered how he could do that, because he couldn't really move. His head lolled to the side when the car started moving, and in the back of his brain Neal knew he should keep track of where he was going. He tried focusing on his surroundings, but the windows were tainted, and the dark view seemed uninteresting.

Only minutes later Neal was asleep... The sedative combined with lack of sleep for many hours, the fights, the emotional roller coaster he had been on for 24 hours, the steady humming of the engine and Neal was sleeping like a baby. His body as well as his mind finally giving in.

---

Back in the house, Greg was trying to rouse Sean who had been completely knocked out when Neal hit him. T and James were gathering their stuff, getting ready to leave. No one took notice of Mozzie who hadn't moved since Neal had been picked up. They didn't care if he was dead or alive. They didn't need him anymore, Neal was gone and soon they would be, too.

Greg managed to get Sean standing. He still felt a little befuddled, but he was getting better by the second.

*“Let's clear out”*, James said about 10 minutes later.

They all carried their belongings to the cars. T dumped a couple of bags and boxes in the back of the van and went to a little shed on the other side of the house. Greg joined him shortly after, and when they returned, each of them carried a couple of gas cans into

the house. While James got in the car, Sean climbed into the passenger seat in the van. He held a damp cloth to his head and checked the time. 9:03. Turner had been a little early, but that suited him just fine. He and Greg had a plane to catch, and he would probably need a little time to freshen up and make sure the bleeding had stopped before they entered the airport. He had to avoid catching attention.

When T and Greg came running out of the house, James had just turned on the ignition of the car. They briefly nodded at James, confirming a job well-done, and jumped into the van, ready to get away fast. But the engine choked when T tried to start it. He tried again, and again... nothing happened.

James turned the car around and drove down the dirt road. In the rear view mirror he saw the first flames through the kitchen window of the house. He wondered for a second why the others didn't get going. Then he turned his focus to the road ahead.

---

*"Come on, come on, come on"*, Peter chanted.

He kept a steady eye on the clock on the display. 8:57. They were so close, but they had reached the forest area and could no longer go as fast as he would want to.

*"Five more minutes"*, the officer driving the car said.

*"S.W.A.T. ETA is 3 minutes"*, a voice said on the radio.

*"First squad will be on the premises in just a moment"*, another voice said.

8:58

*"Start by blocking the road to the house!"*, Peter barked into the radio.

*"10-4"*, the officer on the other end confirmed.

Peter looked at Diana and Jones.

*"Ready?"*, he asked.

*"Always, Boss!"*, Diana answered and Jones nodded in agreement.

8:59

*"Everyone keep an eye out for any suspicious behavior, any unknown vehicles, any people on and around the premises"*, Peter reminded his team over the radio.

He knew he didn't have to, but he felt that by giving orders on the radio, at least he was doing something. He carefully watched all cars they were passing, both those going in the same as in the opposite direction as they were. They had all been smaller cars, no vans, no trucks.

In the very same moment the clock on the display hit 9:00, Peter spotted a squad car parked further up the road, just before a curve. He saw the S.W.A.T. van parked in the side, members of the team running into the trees. The dirt road was only about 0.4

miles so they had decided to send in the first S.W.A.T. members by foot to be sure to get close enough unnoticed to cover all sides of the house.

As soon as the car stopped, Peter, Diana and Jones jumped out. Peter approached the officers from the first squad car that had arrived shortly before the S.W.A.T. team and asked for an update.

*“Anything?”*, he said. *“Any people, any cars, anyone arriving or leaving?”*

*“No, Sir”*, the officer answered. *“We haven't seen anyone but the 2 cars we passed further up this road.”*

*“What kind of cars?”*, Peter asked.

In the very same moment, the radio buzzed.

*“A car is coming down the road, 1 person inside, can't see any in the back seats”*, the voice on the radio informed.

Everyone got into position, ready to take down whoever was leaving the house, but before they got that far the radios buzzed all over - now from different team members:

*“There's a van at the house!”*

*“Got confirmation of Bennet in the car!”*

*“No sign of Caffrey!”*

*“Confirmation of 2 people in the van, 1 person outside.”*

*“Still no sign of neither one of the victims.”*

*“There's a fire. The house is on fire!”*

---

## CHAPTER 21

The following minutes were a combination of chaos and orders being called out in every direction.

One team of agents lead by Diana stopped the car and got James arrested. It all went smoothly and except from a few curse words from James, he didn't pull up much of a fight. Then again... Who would've done that with 4 guns pointed at you and a terrifying Agent Berrigan calling the shots? However, when she started asking questions about Neal and Mozzie, James clamped up immediately.

Other agents and officers were quickly securing the 3 people by the van. They had been about to flee, but despite their efforts in getting the van started, the engine had only spluttered and it didn't take long before all 3 men were on the ground and handcuffed.

The FBI had been prepared for anyone being hurt and had already called for paramedics to join them, but no one had expected the need of firefighters.

Both Peter and Jones had run towards the house as soon as they got information about the fire, but when they reached the courtyard they realized that it would be impossible to save anyone who might have been inside. Huge flames were everywhere, windows exploded, and it would be a matter of minutes before everything would be gone.

They rushed to the aid of two S.W.A.T. members who were on the ground in front of the house.

*“Are you alright?”*, Peter asked.

The agents were coughing slightly, but both of them nodded in confirmation.

*“Yeah”*, one of them said. *“We tried to get in there, but the fire was too powerful, almost like an explosion!”*

*“Come on, we have to get you away from here”*, Jones said helping the agent to his feet.

An officer from the local police came to assist them and he supported the other S.W.A.T. agent. Little burning pieces of the house fell around them, ashes flew in the air, and the heat was strong.

Peter looked up and scanned his surroundings.

*“Scour the area!”*, he yelled to the nearest agents. *“Look for anyone who might have been inside but made it out!”*

Peter's eyes flickered in all directions, searching for movement, back to the house, to the only window left that wasn't already covered in flames. He moved a little backwards, away from the house, to put some distance between himself and the heat from the fire, and then he circled back to get around to the other side. One of the local officers joined him at the same time as he got the latest update on the radio.

*“Bennet won't talk!”*, Diana's voice announced, *“but we found fake ID papers in the car.”*

Peter was just about to tell Diana to bring Bennet back to the station for interrogation, when the officer next to him exclaimed:

*“There's someone over there!”*

Peter's attention was quickly drawn towards the direction, the officer pointed at.

*“Neal?? Mozzie??”*, Peter yelled, and they both quickly ran to the figure that was slumped on the ground not far from the side of the house. Too close to the fire in Peter's opinion.

When they neared, Peter recognized Mozzie, and he crouched next to the little guy, noticing blood on his clothes. Mozzie groaned, and Peter breathed a sigh of relief that he was still alive. The officer called it in on the radio and asked for paramedics to get moving fast.

Peter put a hand on Mozzie's back, hardly daring to turn him around, but he couldn't help himself from asking the question he both wanted and feared to know the answer to right away.

*“Mozzie? Mozzie, can you hear me? Where's Neal? Was Neal in the house?”*

Peter's heart was racing.

*“Mozzie?”*, he repeated while trying to locate the source of the blood.

*“Suit?”*, Mozzie asked in a weak voice.

*“Yeah, it's me... You're gonna be alright, Mozzie. Just hang on”*, Peter reassured him.

He put pressure on the wound he had found in Mozzie's right side, and it resulted in more groans from the guy. Peter almost didn't dare to ask again, but he had to know.

*“Mozzie, where's Neal?”*

*“He's...”*, Mozzie breathed deeply, obviously in pain.

*“Ooow... He... They left... Think they...”*, Mozzie turned to face Peter, who was trying to be patient, trying not to shake the hurting man to get the answers he needed.

*“Who left?”*, Peter asked.

*“Every.. everyone”*, Mozzie sighed.

Then he seemingly pulled himself together and looked straight at Peter.

*“They took him... away. James sold him...”*, Mozzie said.

*“They sold him out?”*, Peter asked a little puzzled. *“To whom?”*

Mozzie shook his head slightly, but before he managed to say anything else, the officer interrupted.

*“Agent, Sir... There's no one else around here. The paramedics are on their way. They'll be here in a few minutes.”*

Peter only nodded, his attention was back at Mozzie who was saying, almost whispering, something, Peter could barely hear. He bent down closer, and when he realized what Mozzie was saying, he almost stopped breathing for a moment.

*“Turner gave... son... of a bitch... papers for N-Neal... was paym'nt...”*

*“Rachel Turner??”*, Peter interrupted in surprise.

*“No... Father”*, Mozzie said and continued slowly. *“Find him... Suit. I'll... I'll be... 'right”*, he waved a weak hand in the air.

---



*“When Mozzie? When did they leave?”*

Mozzie shook his head again, closed his eyes for a moment, before he answered.

*“Don't know.... sure... Not long...”*

Peter quickly told the officer to take over and put pressure on the wound. Then he grabbed the radio and barked out a few orders, first of all telling Diana to get Bennet to talk and make it fast. Then he told Jones to talk to the other men they had arrested on the scene.

*“You did good, Mozzie”,* he said and patted the little paranoid guy who - for some reason - had become a part of his life through Neal, and smiled: *“Just hang in there, okay? Hang in... Help will here in a minute.”*

Peter got up and was about to leave, when the weak voice of Mozzie spoke out once again.

*“Did ya... ya get him?”*

Peter turned around and looked at Mozzie whose face was contorted in pain.

*“Bennet, you mean?”*, he asked.

Mozzie nodded.

*“Yeah, we got him!”*, Peter said, and targeted the officer he added: *“Stay with him until one of my agents take over!”*

The officer confirmed the order as the paramedics arrived and immediately started working on Mozzie. Peter ran towards the front of the house, staying far away from the heat, but still trying to make the run as short as possible. It wasn't easy and he noticed several places where the fire had spread to nearby plants and trees. Right when he thought that this could spread dangerously fast struck him, he heard the sirens getting closer. He hoped that at least that meant they didn't have to worry about wildfires as well.

Peter got hold of one of his agents and quickly told him to go be with Mozzie, follow him to the hospital, and make sure to get as many details from him as possible as soon as Mozzie would be able to talk. He would've liked to ask Diana to handle that, but he needed both her and Jones in their search for Neal.

---

Diana had placed the handcuffed James Bennet in the backseat of a car and she had spent the last 10 minutes trying to get him to talk, to tell them where Neal was, but Bennet had said absolutely nothing.

Diana hit the roof of the car, frustrated.

*“He's your son, dammit!”*, she yelled at James.

James turned his head, and looked straight at Diana. His eyes didn't hold any emotions

at all, when he simply stated:

*“Only by blood!”*

Diana slammed the door, and turned to the nearest officer.

*“Watch him!”*, she commanded angrily.

The young officer immediately complied and kept a watchful eye on the suspect, fearful of the female agent who looked ready to kill anyone who came too close.

Diana decided to join Jones and try her luck on some of the other suspects. Even if James was the man behind it all, surely the others must know some details, too, and she would for sure pull out everything they knew.

The whole area was still a bit chaotic, and the smoke from the fire was beginning to sting in her eyes. She noticed that several of her colleagues and the local officers had covered nose and mouth with cloths or scarfs, and she wanted to do the same, but she also wanted to show her most intimidating side. No scarf for her then!

She was on her way to where the other suspects were held, when she noticed Peter returning.

*“Diana!”*, he called out.

*“Yes Boss?”*, she waited for him to catch his breath and then Peter relayed all the information, he had gotten from Mozzie.

*“Is he alright, Peter?”*, she asked slightly worried about the little guy, the surprisingly good babysitter for Theo.

*“He’s been shot, but I don’t think it’s too serious. It seems like he managed to get out of the house on his own”*, Peter replied. *“The paramedics are with him now, and so is Agent Parsons.”*

A moment later Peter gathered his own team for a short briefing, and they split into smaller groups. Some agents would stay on the scene, the rest would go back to the local police station, interrogate their suspects and look into Rachel Turner’s father to figure out where he could have taken Neal.

Jones had already tried to get Sean Williams to tell them where Neal might be, but he had asked for a lawyer right away. When Greg heard that, he had followed his brother’s lead. All three of them were in the back of different cars, ready to be taken to the station, but Jones wanted to give it a last try on Tyson Banks before leaving. Peter approved.

For the first time since they had arrived to the Williams’ residence, Peter looked at his watch. It had only been half an hour. Neal couldn’t be far away. They needed to act fast. Maybe they could get the chopper in the air to look for possible cars... Wait a minute... Cars? Peter’s eyes scanned the area until he spotted the officer from the first patrol car on the scene not that far away.

*“Excuse me, officer?”*, Peter yelled and in quick strides approached the officer he had spoken to briefly on arrival.

*“Yes, Agent?”*, the officer replied, eager to be of any help to the FBI.

*“You said you passed a few cars on your way down the road, right?”*, Peter inquired.

*“Yes, Sir. We passed two cars only...”*, the officer confirmed, and before Peter had time to ask for more information, he continued.

*“One was an old truck with a driver and one passenger. The other was a black SUV, only the driver was visible. The windows were tinted, but it looked very expensive, Sir.”*

*“Did you happen to get parts of the license plate?”*, Peter asked, very interested in the black SUV.

*“Oh, I got something better than that”*, the officer smiled. *“We had the patrol camera rolling”*

He guided Peter back to the police car, rewound the recording and Peter couldn't help revealing a little smirk when the officer paused on an image of the suspicious car that would most definitely fit to a Colonel in the US Army with a back story like Rachel Turner's father.

*“Get the recording back to the station immediately”*, he said and noted the license plate on his phone.

A moment later Jones had another update. Tyson Banks had spoken a little, when he realized that the game was over. However, he hadn't had much information to share except that he had confirmed that Neal had been part of an exchange between his own and Rachel Turner's father. Colonel Turner and this other guy - apparently his so-called “right hand” - had left the premises shortly before 9 AM. He didn't know where they went, but yes they had indeed been driving a black SUV.

Inside, Peter was extremely frustrated that they had been THAT close to being there when the exchange had taken place. They could've taken down all six of them AND rescued Neal and Mozzie if they had only been here 15-20 minutes earlier.

On the outside, however, Peter was deeply professional, and after a brief conversation with the leader of the S.W.A.T. team and the local Chief from Beacon Police Department, maps were studied and road blocks set up in strategic places. You could get pretty far away from the area in half an hour, but the SUV had been heading towards Route 9, and they would most likely continue on that, unless they had a place to go in the nearby area which seemed unlikely. If they went South they would be going back in the direction of New York, but if they headed North they would've reached highway 84 that could bring them across the Hudson or they could've gone even farther up North towards Poughkeepsie.

Peter ran a hand across his face and realized that he was actually rather dirty. It must be the smoke from the fire, he thought, but realized that part of it was also Mozzie's blood. He sighed inwardly, not too pleased with the situation. They had taken a huge step forward in finding Mozzie and arresting James Bennet and his goons, but he still felt

that they had also taken a step backwards again in their efforts in finding Neal. However, this time at least they knew both who to look for and what to look for.

Peter took a deep breath. It would only be a matter of time, before Neal was back safe, too. They had several leads this time. However, he did wonder what Rachel Turner's father wanted with Neal. After all, Rachel was in prison, super-max, and he would call the Warden and tell them to up the security and keep an extra eye on Turner. Not even Neal would be able to free Rachel Turner by then - not that he thought, Neal would ever participate in breaking her out of prison.

*"We're ready to go, Boss!"*, Diana said pulling him out of his thoughts.

*"Let's go then!"*, Peter confirmed and was actually looking forward to getting away from the smoke, and the "organized chaos" that still seemed to rule the area.

---

Miles away a black SUV was heading West on highway 84 with a still sleeping Neal tightly secured in the back seat completely unaware of Mozzie's rescue, his own fate and the FBI's efforts.

Next to him, Colonel Turner was on the phone.

*"Is the room ready? Good... And what about Rach? Everything going according to plan? Great... We will be there in about an hour."*

---

## CHAPTER 22

Back at the local police station in Beacon it sounded like a busy bee hive. Orders had been given and everyone knew exactly what they were doing.

Jones, Diana and Peter were handling the interrogation of the suspects - though they didn't get much from Bennet. Actually, they didn't get anything from him. He had simply decided to shut up completely.

Peter wanted to know how James could treat his own son like this, but that would have to wait - the important thing would be to find Neal first.

Diana and Jones were both gathering as much information on Rachel's family as possible, especially her father, but it was a tough job getting through military ranks to connect with the right people. Jones were reaching out to all of his old connections, hoping that someone might be able to help.

Agent Parsons had called Peter to inform that Mozzie would be fine. The bullet wound wasn't serious and had been a through and through not hitting any internal organs on its way. He had lost some blood, but Mozzie should be able to answer questions within an hour or so. Peter was relieved. One down, one to go! And that second one - he promised himself - would be back and safe soon, too.

He then allowed himself 5 minutes to call in with an update to Elizabeth. Besides... he needed to hear her voice, needed her comfort. He found a quiet corner in a hallway,

dialed her number and leaned on the wall behind him while realizing that he still felt and looked dirty, though he had washed his hands and face when they got back to the station.

---

Neal had a fuzzy feeling in his head, and it felt like someone had covered his ears with thick pillows. Voices were mumbling, too far away for him to make any sense of what they were saying. If he hadn't known that it would be impossible he almost felt like he was floating, and for a moment up and down were non-existing when a wave of nausea hit him.

He had no idea where he was, but slowly the memories of the last 24 hours came back to him. It took him a couple of minutes to get his bearings enough to even consider trying to open his eyes. The voices were gone now, but he still felt really weird. Moving was out of the question, because Neal had absolutely no connection to his body. He wouldn't be surprised if he saw his arms and legs floating around in the air in front of him. At least that was what he thought, before opening his eyes.

What he did see, though, was ... nothing. He blinked a couple of times to make sure that he had actually opened his eyes, but it didn't change that he was staring into darkness. He slowly moved his head to look around for any weak light sources, but his movements were restricted.

He took a couple of deep breaths. The nausea was more or less gone now, and instead of feeling like floating around, Neal slowly got more and more feeling back in his limbs. He wiggled his toes and his fingers. That went okay. He also concluded that he was definitely lying down on something fairly soft.

Some minutes later Neal finally felt in control of his own body again, and he started testing the bonds that most definitely were the reasons that his movements were not just partly limited, but very much indeed. Honestly? He couldn't move at all. Well except from his toes and his fingers, and the latter were nowhere close to reaching the tight straps that were holding him down.

He wondered how much time had passed since they had left the house. The house?? Mozzie?! Neal suddenly felt guilty that he had caused Mozzie to be hurt. Of course deep down he knew that he actually hadn't hurt Mozzie himself, but if he hadn't looked for Sam, who turned out to be his long lost father, when Ellen was killed, all of this wouldn't have happened. Peter wouldn't have been in jail, Mozzie wouldn't have been shot, and Neal wouldn't have been in this mess.

Why couldn't he just have a life like everyone else? A life with the one he loved - not a serial killer, just a sweet, caring, lovable woman that he could care for, spoil and take on adventures around the world. Legal adventures of course!

Maybe because this was his fate? His parents were a corrupt, murdering cop and an - apparently - sweet, but mentally unstable woman. His first real love had been blown up in an airplane. His surrogate mother was shot and killed. He had never had a real job. The only thing he knew was to con people, fake things and steal whatever he wanted. For years and years he had skirted the lines, and everything had turned out just fine - well, except from those 4 years in prison of course, but that was a minor detail. Maybe this was simply fate catching up on him?

Alone in the darkness, with a body that was probably still affected by an unknown drug, and with no possibility of doing anything but think or alternatively start screaming into the darkness (which he really didn't want to, because that would for sure make him appear weak and out of control), Neal had nothing to do, but silently apologizing to Mozzie, to Peter and Elizabeth, to Ellen, to Kate, to everyone who he had either hurt or dragged into the mess of his life.

And when that was done, he took a deep breath and started considering what his options were from now on. First of all, of course, he needed to know more about where he was, and what Rachel's father's intentions were. He pushed away all mushy feelings and focused on his anger towards his... James... Rachel and her father for interfering with his life when he was so close to actually being able to make decisions on his own. He suspected that they wouldn't let him lie like this forever, so Neal braced himself and waited. Waited for more information, waited for someone to check on him, waited for his chance to get out of there.

---

Just when Peter hung up the phone, Diana came storming into the hallway.

*"Boss", she said. "Rachel Turner is being transferred!"*

*"She's what?", Peter asked. "Who ordered that? Where to? When?"*

It seemed like Diana had been prepared for all the questions, because she hardly noticed, before she started elaborating.

*"We can't see exactly who ordered the transfer, but it seems like an MI5 connection! It's taking place pretty much as we speak, and she is - apparently - being transferred to a military base in Pennsylvania!"*

*"Pennsylvania?", Peter uttered. "But there's no military prison there, right?"*

Diana shook her head.

*"No, it's mostly a logistics center. It has to be connected to the case, Boss!"*

*"Get Jones to contact the base. We're going there, but we can't go in blind. We need to know more. How far away is this base?", Peter inquired.*

*"A little less than 2 hours by car", Diana said.*

Peter checked his watch. If Colonel Turner and Neal had left the house in the forest by car shortly before 9 am, they would probably already be on the base. Peter just hoped that they were staying there. As far as he knew there was no airstrip on the base, so unless they would leave by helicopter, they would have to go to a nearby airport.

He immediately barked out orders to watch the closest airports, start surveillance of the transfer, getting some of the people back in NYC to follow the car, bus or whatever transportation that would carry Rachel Turner on her way.

Peter really had to restrain himself from not just jumping on the helicopter and go to

Pennsylvania right away, but they needed to do this right, and they needed the evidence that could grant them access to the base. By experience he knew that they would need to go through the right channels, otherwise they would simply get kicked out of the base just as fast as he could say his own name.

Besides... They still didn't know exactly how much power, Rachel's father had, and how many people he had working for him.

So Peter decided to trust his people to handle everything in their temporary "command post", and instead he set off to the local hospital to talk to Mozzie. He told Diana and Jones to keep him informed, and once again asked Jones to push every button he could among his military contacts.

*"Already on it, Peter! Don't worry. Go talk to the little guy, find out what he knows, and we'll handle everything here - and get access to the base sooner that you can imagine!"*, Jones said with a confident voice.

Peter knew that he had the best team, and he silently promised himself never to even consider leaving them again.

---

In the hospital Peter quickly found Agent Parsons who told Peter that he had just received news that Mozzie would be set up in a room in a few minutes. He would be tired of course, but he hadn't needed surgery. He'd been stitched up and was being filled with various fluids. They would be able to see him soon.

And so they did... Well, Peter did anyway. Agent Parsons mostly stayed out of sight after orders from Peter who knew how Mozzie felt about the FBI and unknown agents - not to mention hospitals and "the system".

To his surprise Mozzie was awake and quite alert, and he was eager to tell Peter about everything that had happened since he'd met Neal at the park. When Peter told him that they already had a lead on Colonel Turner - and Rachel - Mozzie was about to jump out of bed and go to Pennsylvania right away. Peter managed to hold him back and told Mozzie the rest of what they had found out.

Together they developed the theory that Rachel somehow had communicated to her father that she wanted to be with Neal - or at least wanted Neal - and as the "loving" father Colonel Turner was, he had been prepared to do anything in his power to give his daughter the only thing she wanted.

Now the question was: What did Rachel want from Neal?

They talked about various theories, and if it wasn't because Rachel Turner was already being transferred on unknown terms the most obvious reason would be that Neal was a bargain chip: his return for Rachel's release.

But that wouldn't stick now...

Then there was the diamond? Maybe she - or the people she worked for or with - still wanted the diamond, and Neal was the ransom for that?

That could be a possibility...

Did Neal have other things that could be of value to Rachel? Was her father involved in more than the kidnapping?

They still had a lot of questions to answer, and about an hour later Peter and Mozzie agreed that except from getting back on his feet, and resting, Mozzie would try his contacts in "the underworld" as soon as he had a phone. Peter quickly offered to lend him a phone, but Mozzie just huffed and said that he would never use a fed phone.

*"Mozzie, come on... Do this for Neal, please!"*, Peter argued.

Mozzie looked at him skeptically and said:

*"Go buy me a prepaid phone from a local store, but if I as much as sense that the packaging has been opened, I'm not gonna use it!"*

*"I'll ask Parsons to do..."*, Peter begun but Mozzie interrupted.

*"No, Suit! YOU do it... I don't trust anyone else... I don't even trust you, but Neal's life might depend on this, so I'll agree to you getting me a phone, but just this once. And I only do this for Neal. Bear in mind that I know how your people just screwed him over - again!"*

*"Mozzie, we didn't... I didn't..."*, Peter sighed... He had to give Mozzie this one so he finally said:

*"I know! And I'm sorry... And I'll do anything I can to get Neal his release, but first we need to get him back. We need to cooperate, Mozzie. For Neal!"*

*"For Neal"*, Mozzie nodded.

Peter held his hand out. Mozzie looked at it wearily before he slowly reached out and shook Peter's hand. Shaking hands with a fed? What was he doing? Was he going crazy? Did he hit his head during the kidnapping?

---

## CHAPTER 23

It didn't take much more than 20 minutes before Peter was back at the hospital with a phone for Mozzie. Still wrapped in its original packaging - as promised - and Mozzie quickly thanked the suit for his way of handling an order. Peter looked at him with a furrowed brow, but Mozzie just gestured with his hand, clearly telling Peter to leave him alone right away. So Peter did. However, not without one last request to Mozzie:

*"You call me, Mozzie! As soon as you have anything, you call me!"*

Peter looked at the little guy who seemed even smaller in the big hospital bed, still slightly pale from the blood loss, and with the IV in his hand. For a brief moment Mozzie looked back at Peter. They exchanged glances, and Mozzie nodded.

*"You too... Suit!"*



Peter simply confirmed with a nod, and then he left the hospital room gently closing the door behind him. He found Agent Parsons waiting at the nurses' station, told him to stand guard at Mozzie's room - not because he thought, Mozzie was in danger, but more because... Well... because he didn't really trust Mozzie to not run off and try to rescue Neal on his own - even connected to an IV pole.

Peter then headed back to the police station, and on the way he called Jones for an update.

*"The transfer of Rachel is on route", Jones said and added. "They're driving - at least so far - one bus carrying Rachel and security in front and behind. Just like any other transfer. We have a car following, and a chopper will be in the air soon."*

*"Perfect, Jones - nice job!", Peter responded. "Whatever is going on, we'll figure this out. It has to be related to Neal's kidnapping, I feel it in my gut!"*

*"And never bet against the boss' gut!", Jones said with a smile in his voice.*

*"Call me if anything happens. I'll be back at the station in 10-15 minutes or so", Peter finished the call.*

When he exited the hospital, he paused for a moment, breathed deeply and thought to himself: Hang in there, Neal. We'll be there soon. Just hang in there...

---

Neal actually was hanging in... He couldn't really do much else. Not that he hadn't tried, but the straps holding his hands were just too tight and out of reach even if he turned and twisted his hands as much as possible. Which wasn't that much after all.

So he waited patiently for something to happen. Well, patiently was probably a matter of definition, because Neal was getting seriously antsy. Usually he could be very patient. He could easily wait for hours and hours - if it was for a heist, but at this moment it was just plain and simple a pain in the ass.

He had lost all track of time a long time ago, he had no idea where he was, he had no idea if Mozzie had survived the shot earlier, he had no idea why they wanted him, he had no idea what would happen - or when something would happen. And if there was one thing Neal hated, it was to be left in the darkness... Literally AND figuratively!

---

Outside on the base a convoy of three vehicles arrived, and Colonel Turner's people greeted the Marshals, signed the papers and took over the responsibility of the prisoner. As the vehicles left the premises again, the men lead the female prisoner inside one of the many buildings on the base.

Colonel Turner was there, approaching the prisoner, approaching Rachel, his beloved daughter, with a huge smile. He loved his girl deeply, but he hated seeing her in the orange jumpsuit - and the chains... But that would change soon.

*"Dad?", Rachel said. "Business or pleasure?"*

Her father smiled... *"Pleasure, my baby, definitely pleasure. Come on!"*

A man in uniform unlocked the chains securing Rachel's hands and feet, and her father put his arm around her shoulders guiding her down the hall.

*"It's been a while"*, Rachel said looking up at her father.

*"But you're here now, sweetheart, and I have a surprise for you!"*, her father smiled.

Rachel stopped, tilted her head and watched her father's mischievous expression.

*"What?"*, she asked.

*"Not yet! I have a room ready for you. Go take a shower, get dressed in some decent clothes"*, Turner said and pushed her gently to keep going, passing quite a few doors and other hallways.

*"Oh, come on, dad?!"*, Rachel said and gave him her most charming smile - the one that always worked on her father when she wanted something.

*"Mmm... it won't work this time"*, her father grinned and kissed her forehead. *"Here's your room"*, he stopped by a door with a sign saying "private" next to it.

*"Come see me when you're ready"*, he added. *"My office is just down the hall, to the right and then 2<sup>nd</sup> door on the left."*

---

Neal must have drifted off at some point, probably a combination of exhaustion and whatever drugs that still might be running through his system, because he never heard the door to his room unlock and open, but he woke with a start when the bright light from outside the room hit his face, and he recognized the Colonel's voice.

*"I couldn't get you the diamond, sweetheart - not yet anyway - but I got you something better. Something I know you've wished for, and I think I know why."*

Neal was just about to say something when two people entered his vision; Colonel Turner was leading Rachel close to Neal, covering her eyes with his hands. They were halfway blocking the light coming through the door, when they stopped, and Turner removed his hands with a big smile on his face.

Rachel blinked a couple of times, before she realized who was in front of her.

*"Neal!"*, she exclaimed, her facing turning into one of joy and happiness.

*"Rachel..."*, Neal said with venom in his voice, watching as Rachel turned around, hugged her father and thanked him several times.

*"Anything for you, my dear"*, the Colonel said.

*"I see it runs in the family!"*, Neal stated dryly, interrupting the happy family moment.

*"What?"*, Rachel asked and turned around facing Neal once again.

*"Insanity!"*, Neal said and rolled his eyes slightly.

*"He's a bit of a smart-mouth, I take it"*, Colonel Turner said and continued. *"I'll leave it to you to handle him and..."*, he waved his hand in the general direction of Neal, *"... whatever you need. He looks a little worse for wear compared to your usual standards"*.

Rachel just shrugged.

*"His mouth is one of the things, I like about him, dad. And his eyes!"*

She trailed a hand down Neal's cheek, bent down and kissed him gently on the lips. Neal had no intention of cooperating on that point, so he squeezed his mouth tight, not engaging in anything. Rachel moved away and shook her head a little.

*"Speaking of eyes"*, her father said. *"If you take him out of the room, make sure to cover them up."*

Rachel turned around, sighed, and smiled at her father.

*"Covering up those piercing blue ones that I love so much? I know we can do better than that"*, she smirked and took a hold of her father's arm.

Colonel Turner threw a side-way glance at Neal. A glance that gave Neal the chills. He had no doubt that his previous statement about insanity was spot on - but he had his doubts about who was the most insane of the two in the Turner Family.

*"Yeah "daaad"*, Neal said, pulling out the word. *"We can do better! Like for instance just letting me see this wonderful place of yours which I'm sure is something special!"*

Colonel Turner ignored Neal completely, kissed Rachel on the cheek, turned towards the door, and said: *"I'll get one of my men to bring you something. It won't be long."*

*"How are you doing?"*, Rachel's attention was back at Neal, and she gently ran her hand through his hair.

*"You really want me to answer that truthfully?"*, Neal said, wanting to pull away from her touch, but the strap holding his head in place - and which Rachel was running her fingers over at this very moment - made it impossible.

*"They aren't too tight, are they?"*, she asked.

*"Would you loosen them if I said they were?"*, he asked.

*"Oh, Neal"*, Rachel smiled. *"You know that I would.... not."*

*"So, what's the point?"*, Neal asked and locked gaze with her.

*"To show consideration, that I care for you..."*, Rachel answered, tilting her head to the side. *"And I know you care for me, too, so just humor me..."*

Neal stared directly at Rachel: *"I don't care for you! I don't like you. I don't want to be with you, and I don't want you to touch me!"*

Rachel just laughed, and placed her hand on Neal's chest.

*"You can say anything you want, and you can even try telling yourself that it's the truth, but your eyes and your heart speak otherwise!"*

She trailed her hand further down Neal's body, squeezed his right hand gently, before she almost disappeared out of his very limited field of vision. He felt her touch his feet. Her hands felt warm to his apparently cold feet. He hadn't noticed that he actually felt chilly until she gently wrapped her warm hands around his feet.

*"You need a shower, darling, and your feet need a little care. Seems like you've been running around barefooted",* she said, clearly taking in his entire condition.

*"Oh, really?"*, Neal asked almost casually. *"Well, I guess that's what being kidnapped and running around in a forest do to you!"*

They were interrupted by a knock on the door frame. One of the Colonel's men handed something to Rachel.

*"One drop in each, wait 5 minutes and then just follow the instructions on that one",* the man said and then quickly left the room again.

Neal couldn't see what Rachel held in her hands. She walked out of his vision, and he heard her place the articles on what he guessed was a table or a shelf of some kind.

*"I need some light for this",* she suddenly said, and a second later she was again standing right next to Neal. *"I'll be right back, but let's just do this first. Then you'll be ready when I return."*

Without further ado she pulled up the eyelid of Neal's right eye and dropped a cool, liquid substance into it.

*"Wait! Don't! What're you doing?"*, the words came out quickly, and Neal blinked rapidly.

When Rachel reached for the other eye, he squeezed them both shut. Rachel tried to force his left eye open.

*"Open your eyes, Neal",* she said with that soft, yet menacing voice, Neal had heard from her on the fort when she came to take the diamond.

*"You're nuts!"*, Neal exclaimed with no intention of marginally opening his eyes.

*"Neal...",* Rachel sighed deeply. *"Don't make me hurt you, I don't want to hurt you, but I want to be able to see those blue eyes of yours. Don't worry, honey, I'm not gonna blind you permanently. If we do this right, there will be no harm done. But I need you to open your eyes for me."*

Neal's heart was racing. He only cared deeply about 2 parts of his own body - well, if you

disregarded his manly parts of course - and one was his hands, the other was his eyes. Without any of them he couldn't work, he couldn't create. He felt a stinging sensation in his right eye and feared the worst.

Rachel continued: *"If you don't let me use the drops on your eyes, the anaesthetic injection will hurt like hell!"*

"The what?", Neal didn't believe his own ears.

*"I'm gonna numb your eyes, Neal, then give you an injection that will make you go blind for a while... As I said, it's only temporary, but we need to do this if you want a shower. Hell, if you want to go to the bathroom anytime soon, I need you to not being able to see where we're going."*

Neal was actually a bit surprised by Rachel's patience, and her detailed explanation. Somehow he got the feeling that she actually did care for him... in her own crazy, weirdo-way.

"Come on, Neal", Rachel almost pleaded. Then her voice became more steadfast again.

*"I'll give you to the count of 3 to open your eyes! 1... 2..."*

Neal squeezed his eyes tight. She might have succeeded with one eye by catching him by surprise, but he was not gonna give in just like that.

*"Read the label for me!"*, he said trying to buy himself some time while considering how she could inject him with anything if he just kept his eyes closed, and if that would make any difference in the long run. He would have to open his eyes at one point anyway, if he wanted to escape from these crazy Turners.

"No", she said in an even voice and continued: "3!"

Rachel sighed... *"Have it your way!"*

Neal felt a few drops of the liquid land on the outside of his eyelid.

*"This probably won't make much of a difference, but when you won't let me do this the right way, it's the best I can do."*

Neal heard her leave, the door close and the lock click. He considered opening his eyes at that point. The stinging in his right eye was wearing off, but he could still feel the drops that had pooled in the corner of his left eye. Neal could handle pain. He had always been good at handling pain. If Rachel decided to inject him with anything, he could handle that, too, without anything numbing his eyes. The rebel in him told him so. The rebel who didn't want Rachel to have it her way. Or to make it easy for her. He couldn't do much on his own volition under these circumstances, but he could do this. And so Neal kept his eyes closed.

---

## CHAPTER 24

Peter was reading the latest updates from his people. They hadn't been able to follow

the transfer by helicopter outside the city without being noticed, so they had to go switch between two cars and a motorbike instead. It had worked quite well, and it seemed like the transfer was heading straight to the base in Pennsylvania, just as the papers said. Apparently no detours or anyone trying to free Rachel on the way. So far anyway. They still had about half an hour drive to go.

Peter was pulled out of his reading by the phone ringing. He looked at the display, showing an unknown number.

*“Agent Peter Burke speaking”, he said when picking up.*

*“Suit, I got something for you!”, the voice on the other end said.*

*“Mozzie? What have you got?”, Peter said while heading towards Jones and Diana.*

*“I’m putting you on speaker!”, he added.*

*“Don’t you dare record this conversation, or I’ll hang up immediately”, Mozzie threatened.*

*“Mozzie, just tell us what you’ve got!”, Diana said impatiently.*

*“I might know someone who knows someone who has a brother, who...”*

*“MOZZIE!”, Peter almost yelled at the phone.*

*“Yeah, well... Someone has confirmed that there’s an “unknown” guest in Tobyhanna, but rumors say it’s a high ranking officer - and he says that the deputy commander has a cousin who is a former MI5 agent. He has bragged a lot about that”, Mozzie explained.*

*“So that could be the the connection between MI5 and the US Army - Rachel is a former MI5 Agent”, Peter mused.*

*“There’s more, assembled Suits!”, Mozzie exclaimed.*

*“What?”, Jones asked.*

*Mozzie continued: “My source says that they have tightened security since about 3 hours ago - apparently because of some extraordinary expensive equipment being temporarily stored on the premises.”*

*“Do you know anything about that equipment?”, Peter asked anxiously.*

*“Sadly no”, Mozzie answered, and added: “My source has not been allowed close to the building where it’s being kept, but he said that it is supposed to be moved again in a day or two.”*

*“So, if this equipment - whatever it might be - is related to this case, we are in a bit of a hurry”, Jones stated.*

*“We are in a hurry, no matter what, Jones. For Neal’s sake!”, Peter said.*

*“Could they need Neal to operate some of this equipment?”*, Diana asked.

*“Maybe”*, Mozzie said over the phone. *“But... allegedly I usually handle computers and machinery, not Neal, and they said they didn't need me. Neal is the creative guy.”*

The group all fell quiet for a few seconds thinking the new intel over, but Peter quickly came back to the here and now.

*“Do you have anything else, Mozzie?”*, he asked.

*“No Suit - that's it for now!”*, Mozzie answered, and Peter suddenly thought the little guy sounded awfully tired.

He thanked Mozzie and they once again agreed to call each other right away if they had anything new to add to the case. At the end he told Mozzie to get some rest and feel better soon.

*“Not that I take orders from any Suits... but... thank you, Peter”*, Mozzie sighed.

Another sign that Mozzie had reached the limit of his resources. Calling Peter for Peter and not Suit had only happened on very few occasions, and all three agents knew that. They finished the phone call and set to follow up - and hopefully find out what kind of equipment Mozzie's source had been talking about.

A few minutes later it was confirmed that the vehicle carrying Rachel Turner had reached Tobyhanna Military Depot. Peter asked his agents to keep up surveillance of the base - but from a distance, stressing the importance of not being spotted.

Ever since they had found out that Neal was probably being held on the base in Tobyhanna, Jones had been trying to get in touch with old colleagues from his time in the marine, and finally he received the call he had been waiting for. An old army friend of his was now working as a computer engineer on the base. Jones fully trusted his friend and explained the entire situation ending with the question about what kind of equipment they had received since this morning. The answer was not like anything he would have expected.

*“Peter!”*, Jones said while rushing into what had become Peter's temporary office without knocking.

Peter looked up, slightly startled, and Jones continued before he managed to say anything.

*“The equipment on the base. It's some kind of isolation tank. You know... the kind used for transporting people with contagious diseases.”*

*“What?”*, Peter was just as surprised as Jones had been.

*“My friend was told by his commanding officer that all personnel, except from very few people, have been told to stay clear of one specific building because of the risk of contamination. The talk amongst his colleagues is that they either have received or will be receiving someone infected by ebola - though it is not usually something they would handle in Tobyhanna. But - you know - people talk, and it could be someone local who*

*has returned from Africa or something...”*

Jones finally paused to let Peter talk.

*“If there’s anyone in that area suspected of ebola - or any other contagious disease for that matter - someone will know about it. Get Diana to...”*

Peter was interrupted by Jones.

*“She’s already on it!”*, he said, and once again Peter silently thanked his amazing team for not needing to be told what to do all the time.

Just a few minutes later Diana had the answer. Absolutely nobody was suspected of any contagious diseases in that area. And so the guessing game began! Why was there an isolation tank involved? Who was it for? When - and where - would it be going if that was the “expensive equipment” that would stay on the base for just a couple of days?

Usually Peter liked to solve riddles, but right now when those riddles were part of an ongoing crime that needed to be solved right away, he felt more frustrated with all the new questions that arose for every answer they found.

The working theory ended up being that the Colonel or Rachel had decided that an isolation tank and a message about a sick person on the base would be the best way to keep other people away from where ever they kept Neal. A very possible theory, because it would give them privacy in a secure area to move on with whatever plans they were working on.

Jones' friend had promised to call back immediately if he heard or saw anything that could prove to the FBI that Neal was on the base. They also decided to start working the angle that the FBI somehow needed to interrogate Rachel Turner, hence needing to enter the premises.

Now that Mozzie was safe and awake they also had an eye witness placing the Colonel on the crime scene in the forest, so if they could somehow prove that he was the “unknown” guest, or at least get probable cause that he was on the base it would be no problem to convince a judge to give them the warrant they needed.

They discussed whether or not to relocate to Pennsylvania. If they moved too close they could risk alarming Colonel Turner and his people, before the FBI was ready to move in, but if they stayed in Beacon they would be too far away to move in fast.

In the end they decided to contact Scranton Police Department and relocate as fast as possible. They had 2 teams of 2 agents each located close to the base already, they could land their helicopter at the local medical community center, and the rest of the agents could travel by car coming from various directions so not to catch attention.

Peter checked his watch. It had been a little more than 6 hours since they found Mozzie and the Williams family's house, less than 2 hours since Rachel arrived in Tobyhanna, 26 hours since Neal was taken. The rule of thumb in abduction cases said that the biggest chance of finding the victim alive was within the first 24 hours. Peter just hoped that this case didn't follow the usual “rules”. Well... Neal was involved so of course there was nothing usual about the situation. And Neal was most definitely not the usual victim!



---

It didn't take long before Neal heard someone enter the room again. He expected it was Rachel, but he never opened his eyes to be sure. He just listened. She was scrambling around, moving things, and after a few minutes she appeared to be satisfied with whatever she had been doing.

Neal had hardly finished that thought, before he knew. He heard a small click, and even with his eyes closed, he felt a blinding light in his face. Rachel had definitely found herself some light.

*"Do you really insist on being so stubborn, Neal?"*, she asked.

Neal didn't say anything, and Rachel made a disapproving sound.

He felt her hand on his face, and she easily pulled up the right eyelid. The light was way too bright after having been in more or less darkness for hours, but no matter how hard Neal tried to close his eye, he had no real control. Those drops had done their trick. She moved on to the left eye, but Neal was still very much in control of that.

Rachel shook her head.

*"Your choice, I guess"*, she said, and a few seconds later Neal saw a needle right in front of him. Rachel smiled. She smiled that sickly sweet conning smile, and Neal felt almost sick to his stomach that he had ever seen that smile for anything else but deceiving.

Rachel pressed the needle into the area around Neal's eye. Two different places. It didn't hurt, but he did feel a stinging sensation, maybe a light pressure, but that was the right eye. It was a completely different story on the left. It felt like she was pressing the needle all the way into his brain, and Neal couldn't help the hissing sound that escaped his lips.

Rachel pulled out the needle, just to inject him again on the other side of the eye. The stinging was 10 times worse than the time Neal was stung by a bee, and in the end he could no longer keep his eye closed, though he was sure it would pop out if he opened it. Of course that didn't happen, but the pressure and the stinging made his eye water, and Neal wasn't completely sure if it was actual tears running down his cheek.

*"Do you feel that, Neal?"*, Rachel taunted him.

This time Neal didn't keep quiet.

*"Fuck you!"*, he said through gritted teeth.

*"I'm sure you would want to do that, but not right now, my love"*, Rachel said, smiling big.

Then she added: *"I know it said two injections on the label, but I'll go with three on this one - just to teach you that I AM in charge here"*.

Neal took a deep breath and realized that his heart was racing, but he was intend on not showing any other signs that Rachel had been right.

She pressed in the needle a third time, but if it wasn't because Neal could see that she injected him below his eye, he would have had no idea where the needle went in. His entire left side of his face hurt like hell, and it all felt like it was twice as big as it was supposed to be. Fortunately it didn't last long, before the anaesthetic kicked in, and the burning sensation subsided.

Rachel pushed the lamp away and placed her hand above Neal's heart.

*"I think you need to relax, dear. Your heart is working way too fast for someone who is just lying down",* she said and added: *"You'll see me in a few hours - don't worry!"*

Neal found it hard to relax, though. His eyesight was already failing him, and everything became one big blur. He could still sense some kind of light in the room, but he couldn't even place from what direction it came. He was quite sure that if Rachel said it was only temporary, it probably was, but for many years Neal had relied on his sight in pretty much everything he did, so being without...

Neal didn't get to finish that thought, before he felt his head being released. Rachel then gently lifted his head a little and kissed his forehead. Neal's neck felt all stiff, and he really wanted to roll his head around to get the muscles working again, but Rachel still had her hands on him. She moved her fingers through his hair.

*"I'll wash those beautiful locks for you",* she almost whispered.

Neal cringed inwardly. He really didn't want Rachel to touch him, but he also figured that if he wanted to be released, he should probably let her - at least for now.

He felt her hands move down his upper arms, and two more straps were released. Until then Neal hadn't realized that his breathing had been slightly restricted, but as soon as the strap around his chest was removed he took in a deep breath, and it felt so much better than before.

*"Come on - sit up!",* Rachel said, and with a hand behind his back, she helped Neal into a sitting position.

For a moment Neal thought the whole room was a carousel, his head was spinning, and he was just about to lie down again, when Rachel climbed up behind him. She held him close for a moment, and Neal felt her breathing close to his right ear.

*"Are you okay?",* she asked in a voice that actually sounded a little worried.

Neal took another deep breath, and shook his head a little. He thought he tried to blink to clear his vision - though of course it wouldn't help a bit - but in reality he had no idea if he did. Were his eyes even open at this point? He wasn't sure until he turned his head to the side and sensed a bit of light.

*"Your brain will probably get used to it soon",* Rachel said, *"but I will make sure you don't fall and hurt yourself."*

Then she continued:

*“I’m gonna release your hands now, one at a time, but I advice you to stay calm, okay? If you don’t, I might need to hurt you, and I really don’t wanna hurt your beautiful body, Neal”,* she said while slowly moving her hand down Neal's right arm, before she intertwined her fingers with his.

*“Do we have a deal?”*, she said, squeezing his hand gently.

Neal nodded.

*“I need to hear you so say so”*, Rachel added.

*“Yes, we have deal”*, Neal said in an even voice.

Then his hands were released, but the reprieve was short, because Rachel quickly pulled his hands behind his back, and before he knew of it Neal felt the - by now - well-known feeling of zip-ties being tightened around his wrists.

*“You don’t have to do that. What am I going to do anyway? I can’t see shit, and my head is spinning”*, Neal told her, clearly annoyed.

He was so tired of being restrained that he just couldn't let it go without at least trying to avoid it.

*“Oh, but I know I do, Neal - I know you”*, Rachel said. *“Your tools are your eyes and your hands, and I’ve seen you work in darkness, so just taking away one of those tools won’t be enough. Not yet, anyway!”*

She tightened the zip-ties even more.

*“Oow!”*, Neal exclaimed - maybe a little louder than necessary.

*“What happened to you not wanting to hurt me?”*, he asked.

*“Sometimes love hurts”*, Rachel explained, like it was the most natural thing in the world.

And for once Neal fully agreed.

---

## CHAPTER 25

Rachel moved towards Neal's feet. She kept one hand on him, gently stroking his legs, before Neal felt the strap holding down his right leg being released. For a second he tensed his muscles and considered lashing out at Rachel as soon as she released his left leg, but she must have sensed him tensing.

*“Easy Neal”*, she said having a firm grip on his right foot. *“You might feel where I am, but do you really think you would succeed with a kick when you can’t SEE where I am?”*

Neal considered that for a moment. Rachel was probably right. He really had know idea if to kick left, right or straight ahead. He sighed inwardly, sick and tired of feeling helpless, not being able to do anything. To get away. He was Neal Caffrey, for Heaven's

sake, escape artist and always with a back-up plan. But right now he just felt... He felt useless, he felt betrayed, and he felt disgusted. Betrayed by both Rachel and his father, disgusted by having her hands on him - and disgusted by him actually having enjoyed those hands, her entire body, close and intimate, not that long ago. Neal almost shivered from that thought.

*“Answer me, Neal”, Rachel said. “When I ask you a question, I expect you to answer. What happened to being polite? You’ve always been polite!”*

*“I guess my last bit of politeness flew out the window a long time ago!”, Neal answered and continued. “Maybe around the same time I found out that my supposed girlfriend wouldn’t hesitate to kill my best friend... or me for that matter!”*

*“Aaaw... come on, sweetie. Are we back at that old story? Forget about that... Besides... You were the one to suggest that we ran off to Croatia. Now you’re here with me. We can be together, we can...”*

*“No, we can’t!”, Neal interrupted Rachel’s stream of words. “You don’t get it, do you?”*

His voice raised with anger.

*“You’re a wacko! An out-of-your-mind nutcase who does not understand the concept of love! The concept of trust! I’m a hell of a con man, but I’ll admit to anyone that I’ll never be good enough to con myself into believing in anything you say or do. And I don’t even wanna try!”*

*“But Neal...”, Rachel began in her sugar sweet voice.*

*“Don’t “but Neal” me, Rachel! Mozzie and I called Peter several hours ago. Your dad’s hired goons weren’t even good enough to keep us away from something as simple as a phone. The FBI knows what is going on, they have been tracking down me, you, and your dad for hours, and it’s just a matter of time, before they’ll have a plan in motion, and you will all be heading to jail - or should I say BACK to jail, in your case.”*

Neal spoke with the most convincing voice he could muster, though he didn’t know for sure if anything he just said was right, except from the fact that he and Mozzie truly had sent up a flare for the FBI to find. At least some kind of flare.

Rachel said nothing. She removed her hands from Neal’s feet, and he could hear her taking a few steps. Then she sighed deeply.

---

Peter, Jones, Diana and 2 other agents were on their way to Tobyhanna. The flight time would be only about half an hour, and they were almost halfway. Peter was getting anxious, and he could see that the same went for Diana and Jones, too.

They had an agreement with the local police department in Scranton, and Peter’s team, the FBI’s hostage rescue team, and S.W.A.T. agents were all cooperating. It would work out, Peter thought to himself. They had all the best people on the case. He exchanged glances with Jones, who nodded, clearly knowing that Peter was mentally going through everything they had planned so far. They still had details to sort out, but they couldn’t do that until they were near the base.

The two teams on the ground in Tobyhanna had done some reconnaissance and were ready to brief the rest of them as soon as they were in the area.

Peter suddenly felt the need to text El. To give her an update - or more precisely to make her write him back. He needed her comforting words even if it was only by text. He pulled out his phone and gave her a status update, told her they were on their way to the base, and that he hoped they would have Neal back safe and sound in a few hours.

The answer came immediately:

*“You will, Hon. You always find him, and I know you will succeed this time, too :-\*”*

Peter smiled. That was his wife. His always trusting wife who had faith in him being the best. At least Peter hoped that he would be the best agent this time. Neal deserved that, after the message Peter had had to give him in the morning the day before. He might not have been the best one to convince the higher-ups to cut Neal's sentence short, but he sure as hell would do his best to at least give Neal the chance to appeal that decision by bringing him back in one piece.

Peter's thoughts were interrupted by the pilot's voice over the intercom:

*“ETA in 3 minutes!”*

We're coming, Neal, Peter thought. We're coming!

---

Neal would have loved to be able to read Rachel's facial expression. He hardly breathed waiting for her reaction, waiting for her to say something.

But she didn't!

Instead he felt the strap around his left foot being released with a rough pull. Before he knew what was happening, Rachel grabbed his arm and shoulder, and with an angry roar she pulled him off whatever he had been lying on and pushed him to the floor with a force Neal would never have imagined from a slender woman like Rachel.

With his arms bound behind his back, Neal had no chance of breaking the fall, and when his head hit the ground, it almost felt like his brain was bouncing off the inside of his skull. For a moment Neal was sure he would black out when a wave of nausea hit him, but Rachel immediately pulled him to his feet and pushed him up against the wall. No time to black out just like that. She held him in place by pressing her arm against his throat making it hard to breath.

*“You will be mine, Neal, MINE!”*, Rachel hissed out through gritted teeth.

Then she released him, and Neal's knees almost buckled under him, but thanks to the support from the wall behind him, he actually managed to keep himself upright, heaving in a few deep breaths, still stunned by the sudden attack from Rachel. Just a few seconds later, Neal felt her one hand on his chest and the other one caressing his forehead gently, and in a soft voice she said:

*"I always get what I want, Neal... and I want you. If you don't know that by now, I will teach you."*

She kissed him, but Neal drew away, shaking his head - oh wow, that made the room spin - trying to get his thoughts straight. Rachel pulled him back, not quite gentle, but also not as rough as she had been just moments before. Under normal circumstances Neal would have simply broken free from her grip and maybe even kept her in place instead, but this whole kidnapping experience had taken its toll on him. Besides... it was difficult keeping anyone in place with your hands restrained. He was sick and tired of being restrained.

She kissed him again, this time on the side of his neck, and said in a voice that sounded sickly sweet in Neal's ears:

*"I love you, and I will be with you. You will be with me, and you will learn to love me... again."*

*"Rebecca... Rachel..."*, Neal still wasn't completely sure what to call her, *"You and I will NEVER be, and if you think you can teach me to love you, you should rethink the concept of love."*

*"Oh, I can teach you"*, she almost purred. *"You love art, and I will show you the art of teaching, if that's what it takes."*

She took a firm grip on Neal's right arm and started walking. Neal couldn't do much but follow along on sore feet, blinded and - now probably - in a slightly concussed state.

*"But first you need a shower, and I'll clean up that bruise on your forehead. Blood on your face doesn't suit you"*, Rachel stated matter-of-factly.

Neal hadn't even realized he was bleeding. He definitely wasn't on the top of his game here, and he thought to himself that maybe it wasn't that bad after all to have a shower. Maybe it would help clear his head, and hot water would absolutely not hurt his sore feet and tired body.

*"Lead the way"*, he said, like she wouldn't already.

When they left the room, Neal sensed light - a lot of light compared to the almost complete darkness in the other room - but he couldn't see anything, and walking in unfamiliar places not being able to see was really uncomfortable. He tried looking around, searching for shapes that he could recognize, but it was impossible. Everything was just one big blur.

He felt another wave of nausea coming, big time. He almost gasped and stopped walking. Rachel tried pulling him forward, but Neal dug his heels in.

*"Wait!"*, he said and bent forward, trying to get his head down while still keeping his balance.

Rachel must have felt that he was about to tumble over, because the grip on his arm tightened, and he felt her other hand on his forehead.

*"What?"*, she asked, clearly wondering what was going on.

*"Dizzy"*, was all Neal managed to say before he felt bile rise in his throat.

In any other situation Neal would have been deeply embarrassed by what happened next, but as he threw up what tiny bit of food and drinks he had had in what felt like ages, he couldn't help feeling satisfaction when he heard Rachel's reaction.

*"Not on my shoes. Eeew, Neal! Dammit! You.... "*

Whatever she was about to say disappeared in a growl, as she pulled him to the side and pushed him down near a wall. Neal almost crumbled to the ground, shutting his eyes, and actually feeling okay getting off his feet.

*"Sit! Don't move, and if you do - I swear to God..."*, Rachel said while shaking Neal's arm like he was some kind of rag doll.

*"Yes, Ma'am!"*, Neal said with a smirk.

Even though his head still felt like it was made of Jello, Neal heard Rachel leaving while muttering something that sounded like *"That is just SO not attractive..."*

When she came back and obviously started cleaning the floor, Neal heard her suppress a gag or two, and he figured that she - just like he did - had a hard time coping with the smell of other people's vomit.

*"I should make you clean this up yourself, you know!"*, she grumbled.

*"It's your own fault"*, Neal just stated.

A few seconds later he continued:

*"But if you insist, I will do it. Just release my hands and I'll take care of it."*

*"Shut up, Neal!"*, was the only response he got.

---

At the medical clinic in Scranton the helicopter had landed, and Peter, Diana and Jones were greeted by an officer from the local police force.

*"I'm here to take you to the station, Agent Burke"*, the officer said while shaking Peter's hand, and before Peter could ask any questions, the officer continued.

*"We are all ready and set up to assist you in any way we can. One of my colleagues has a brother working on the base, and my boss is right now talking to him about a "confidential case" that we might need his help with. That's why I'm here to pick you up, and not my boss"*, the officer explained.

*"Good! That sounds good. We appreciate your help, but I'll like to talk to the man in question, before we decide on whether or how to use him"*, Peter quickly added.

*"Of course, Agent Burke!"*, the officer replied.

Jones asked: *“Have any of our agents near the base been in contact with you?”*

*“Yes, Sir”, the officer smiled. “One of your colleagues is actually waiting for you ready to give you more information in person.”*

*“Did anyone leave the base?”*, Diana quickly asked.

*“Not as far as I know”*, the officer answered, before they all got into his car and headed for the station.

Jones called his contact on the base to ask if he had been able to get confirmation that either Neal or the Colonel was on the base, but he had come up empty so far. Hopefully they would have more luck with the other inside guy.

As it turned out the other guy was working in the kitchen, and they had been cooking for one or more unknown guests for lunch. However, these guests had been eating in private quarters, and the food had been picked up by no less than the 2<sup>nd</sup> in command.

A brief discussion later they agreed on a plan. When dinner was getting close, the guy from the kitchen would prepare the meal a little early and bring it to the closed off building under the excuse that the food was getting cold since no one was there to pick it up. Hopefully, he would at least get close enough to gather some intel, but if they were lucky he would get all the way inside and identify either the Colonel or Caffrey.

Diana sat back for a moment, thinking about something.

*“Does anyone know how the base’s evacuation plan is in case of ... let’s say a fire?”*, she asked the assembled agents and officers. She continued:

*“Depending on their plan we could set off the fire alarm. We do have two people on the inside now, and if they are aware that it’s a false alarm, they could act as they are simply looking to get people out of the buildings.”*

*“We would have to look into that”*, Jones said, *“but it’s a possibility for sure.”*

*“Find out if we can use that approach in any way”*, Peter ordered, and Jones and Diana set to work right away.

Peter liked this... The more options they had, the better chance that one of them would carry fruit. And hopefully sooner than later.

---

## CHAPTER 26

After Rachel finished cleaning the floor she brought Neal to a bathroom. He soon realized that he had to leave all modesty by the door, because even during the shower, Rachel didn't release his hands. However, she did undress him gently, and she even apologized that she had to cut his t-shirt to get it off, and Neal shook his head slightly, almost in disbelief.

How long the shower lasted, and if Rachel undressed herself completely, too, to join him



under the hot water, Neal didn't know. She carefully washed his body, asked him to get on his knees so she could wash his hair, and while he was off his feet anyway he also felt her scrub them gently. He hissed a little when she ran the cloth over bruises and cuts here and there, but mostly he enjoyed the warm water while concentrating on fighting minor dizzy spells that came and went seemingly on a regular basis.

After the shower Rachel carefully dried him off, dressed him in - what Neal hoped were clean - boxers and a pair of pants, neither sweatpants nor suit pants, more likely a pair of chinos or something, Neal thought.

*"I hope you don't feel too chilly, but a shirt will have to wait, darling"*, Rachel said while running her hand down Neal's chest.

*"Besides I don't want you to hide that nice body of yours"*, she added.

She placed Neal on a chair and stroked his chin. Neal had fought hard to accept having Rachel's hands all over him, but now that he was clean and - halfway - dressed, he'd had enough of her touches, and so he couldn't help pulling away.

Rachel barely registered, she simply continued.

*"You need a shave. I like your stubble, but it's a little too long in some places."*

*"What if I want a beard?"*, Neal asked.

*"You don't!"*, she simply stated.

*"My dad used to have this old-fashioned razor knife. I'll go ask if he still has it, and I can use that on you. It'll be perfect"*, Rachel said.

Then she held Neal's head in her hands, kissed his forehead and said:

*"I'll find a plaster for your cut as well... Now... Don't. Move!"*

The entire sentence was said in a sweet caring voice, except from the last two words. In less than a second her voice sounded menacing and threatening, and Neal felt the chills run down his spine. Her ability to switch between personalities in a breath was truly scary.

Neal heard Rachel rustling with her clothes, then she left and closed the door behind her, and Neal had absolutely no intention of staying put. Unless she had thought of bringing the scissors that she used to cut off his shirt, they had to be around. This could be it. This could be his chance, and he had to take it. Neal didn't even consider if his temporary blindness would hinder his chances. He got up, and thinking back to what he had heard Rachel doing, he felt his way along the wall and quickly reached some shelves, a table with a wash and some... something soft, pieces of cloth. Neal was on his toes, with his fingers searching the surface until they reached what he was looking for.

It didn't take more than a few seconds before Neal had a good grip on the scissors and managed to cut through his bindings. Neal 1 - bindings 0!

Neal immediately rubbed his eyes to try and clear his vision, but it didn't help. He

quickly turned on some lukewarm water, and stuck his head under the tab, rinsing his eyes as best as possible, before he grabbed a piece of his t-shirt from before and wiped his face. It felt rather disappointed when he removed the cloth from his face, realizing that if the water had done any difference at all it might be a tiny decrease of his blurred vision, but no where enough for him to see anything but lights and shadows.

“*Fuck!*”, Neal exclaimed and rubbed his hands in his face.

“*Aaargh...*”, he sighed deeply, then pulled himself together.

“*Come on, Neal - it doesn't matter, you can do this!*”, he encouraged himself, before once again holding out his hand, finding the wall and started moving until he got to the door. It wasn't even locked!

Neal quietly opened the door and listened. There was nothing. No sound of footsteps, no one talking, just silence. He slid out the door, and closed it behind him. Left or right? Going back the way they had come, or going the opposite? Neal chose left - away from his former cell.

He kept his left hand on the wall all the time, wondering how many doors he passed on his right that he didn't know of. He kept his focus on his hearing and looking for any bright lights that might signal a door or a window leading outside.

---

Peter looked at his watch. It was about time for their plan A to get going. Their inside guy in the kitchen had just started preparing dinner, and within the hour they expected to have a signed warrant. But right now Peter felt anxious. He always did before a take down or a big operation - and this was definitely big.

“*How are you doing, Boss?*”, Diana asked, looking a bit anxious herself.

“*As ready as I can be! Are you and Jones ready?*”, Peter inquired even though he knew that they were.

“*We are! All the teams are setting up as we speak, the car is ready to bring us close to the base in about 5 minutes. Agent Garner will be handling the warrant. As soon as it comes through, he'll let us know and make sure it gets to you immediately. We will be at the train station - it's the closest we can get to the base without attracting too much attention*”, Diana summed up the plan.

Peter downed the last of his coffee, and checked his watch one more time.

“*Let's go, then!*”, he said.

They had a drive of about 25 minutes to get from the police station in Scranton to the train station in Tobyhanna, and those 25 minutes were probably the longest 25 minutes in Peter's life - well... if you excluded the weeks he spent in prison.

At the train station everything was buzzing, teams were ready on all sides of the bases, hiding in the forest, and some acting as random people from the local area.

About 15 minutes after Peter, Diana and Jones arrived to the station the message came

in on the intercom: 5 minutes until the inside guy would bring the prepared meals to the secluded building!

Peter nodded: *“Everyone on stand-by!”*, he ordered.

And then they could only wait for an update.

---

Neal felt like he had been walking for ages. In reality it had only been a minute or two. He had turned a corner and seriously considered leaving the wall on his left side to try the one he figured would be on the right side of the apparently long hallway. But then the wall changed. Neal quickly felt for a handle and found one. No doubt about this being a door. He leaned in closely and listened for any noises or voices on the other side, but there was silent.

He pushed down the handle, holding his breath, but he wasn't lucky. The door was locked, so Neal moved on right away, still listening and looking for brighter lights, but where he was at the moment it seemed pretty dark.

Neal started moving faster. The more he walked, the steadier he felt, though he still felt smaller waves of dizziness once in a while, but he suspected the adrenaline helped keeping him on his feet.

It didn't take long before he reached another door. Same procedure, listening, grabbing the handle, locked. Neal cursed his lack of luck and for being trapped in such a huge place.

Suddenly he came to a halt. The wall he'd been following ended and he almost bumped into another wall blocking his way. No, wait a second, it wasn't just a wall. Neal's hands felt it before his mind registered that he had come to a double door, doors with class, his hands definitely felt glass, and when he put a gentle pressure on the door to the right, it moved. He quickly deduced that if anyone was on the other side, they'd already seen him, but since nobody reacted to his presence, he gave the door a harder push, and the it opened. Neal could hear noises somewhere. Nothing specific, not someone talking, just no longer complete silence.

He let go of the door and decided to follow the wall on his right side this time. However, right before he heard the door close, he also heard a faint voice slipping through. The voice he had hoped not to hear just yet:

*“NEEEAAAL!!”*

---

## CHAPTER 27

Neal wanted to run, get away as fast as he could, but not being able to see anything but a blur of lights and shadows caused him to suppress his flight instinct and instead focus on finding a place to hide. The wall on his right side was very different from the previous wall, and it didn't take more than a few seconds until Neal found a new door. He pressed his ear to it and listened, but all he heard was the pounding of his own heart.

He pushed down the handle, gently, and the door opened. Neal listened again, but as nothing happened, and he heard no movement or no sounds, he slid in and quickly closed the door behind him. He felt for a lock and breathed a sigh of relief, when he found one. It might not keep his captors away, but it would surely delay them and hopefully make it harder for them to find him.

Neal felt extremely ridiculous fumbling around with his arms stretched out in front of him. Even though he kept fairly close to the wall, Neal still managed to bump into something that felt like an armchair, and right next to that he felt a small table. What kind of place was this?

He was also a little surprised that the floor was no longer cold tiles. It was a rug of some kind. His sore feet were enjoying that very much. The room seemed rather dark, except from a square-like of bright light coming from one spot only. Neal figured it had to be a window, and he moved towards that. His right hand made it to his eyes again, as he was unconsciously trying to clear his vision, not thinking about that he was still walking towards the light, until he bumped into something... hard.

*"Oow! Shit!"*, Neal exclaimed loudly, feeling a spike of pain in his right knee.

He rubbed his knee repeatedly, taking weight off the leg, and for a moment he was sure he had busted his kneecap, but fortunately the pain subsided quickly and became more of a dull throbbing. Neal felt along the edges of whatever he had hit. It felt like a desk, he noticed a lamp, found the switch and briefly considered turning it on, but he figured that it wouldn't do him any good anyway. He only risked that the light could be seen from somewhere, either through the window or the crack beneath the door or some other way Neal had no knowledge of because of his temporary blindness.

Neal's fingers glided over the desk, and he found a pen, some papers, a notebook. His mind went into overdrive. Please, let this be an office, he thought, please let there be a phone. He moved around the desk, found a chair and sat down, kept feeling his way around, and finally to the far left side of the desk - there it was!

*"Thank God for landlines!"*, Neal silently said to himself, as he lifted the handset and got ready to push the buttons. But he had no dial tone. Instead he heard a voice:

*"Yes, Sir?"*

It took Neal a few seconds to realize that this wasn't an ordinary phone, but more some kind of intercom.

*"Sir? Are you there?"*, the voice said.

In his most authoritative voice, Neal answered:

*"I need you to look up Agent Peter Burke from the FBI. Call him and arrange a meeting as soon as possible."*

*"The FBI?"*, the voice in the other end inquired. *"I don't underst... Who is this? Why are you calling from the Major's office?"*

Neal heard background noise, but he kept going, relying on his ability to talk himself out of pretty much any situation.

*“This is Captain Brooks. I'm here with the Major, going over our plans for the upcoming week, and we need to discuss some details with Agent Burke”,* Neal quickly continued.

*“But...”*

Before the man on the other end of the line said more, Neal interrupted harshly:

*“Are you refusing to obey an order?”*

*“No, Sir... Captain... I just don't have any...”*

*“Now!”*, Neal almost yelled into the speaker.

*“Yes, Captain!”*, the voice sounded less confident.

*“Thank you! And never go against orders from your superiors again”*, Neal added and hurriedly disconnected.

He felt the adrenaline pumping in his veins and silently prayed that this person - whatever he was to this “Major” - would obey right away. And then it clicked! He must be in some kind of military facility. It all made sense considering Rachel's father was a colonel, this apparently was a major's office, and thinking back to the man who had delivered supplies to Rachel, he knew they had personnel around as well.

Neal figured that he should probably try to find another place to hide in case anyone decided to check out the mysterious captain or come ask if the major needed anything. He considered the window for a moment, got up and felt his way over there. It wasn't much trouble getting it to open, and he was briefly tempted to just get the hell of there, but instead he moved back to the desk, found the pen, and while listening carefully he dropped it out the window. Neal heard it land after just a second or so, and it didn't sound like it rolled off whatever it landed upon, so he figured he was on ground floor.

At the same time Neal heard commotion from the hallway, loud voices yelling, and a few seconds later someone was at the door.

*“Get the key for this one!”*, a gruff voice yelled from the hallway.

He didn't have many choices. He could go back and block the door with the armchair, but would it hold? He could get under the desk and hide, or he could jump out the window! How much time did he have? What would be outside the window? Neal felt his heart beating fast, like it was trying to break out of his chest.

He heard rustling, keys in the lock, and made a decision.

---

Peter, Jones and Diana were all ready to move, when the call came from the man inside. It was on speaker, and they only needed him to say the confirming words. They were all holding their breaths, when the voice came through:

*“Sorry, but I didn't see anything or anyone. I didn't even make it all the way, before I was stopped”, the guy said.*

Peter let out a frustrated sigh, turned around and swore quietly while he ran a hand through his hair.

Diana looked at him and asked:

*“Boss?”*

She didn't need to say anything else. Peter faced the rest of his team, and gestured to Jones to continue.

*“Who stopped you, and did they say anything?”*, Jones asked the kitchen assistant.

*“A higher ranking guard”, he replied. “A sergeant, I don't know him. He said that the building was a quarantine area, and only certain personnel was allowed access.”*

*“What happened to the food?”*, Jones continued.

*“I had to bring it back with me and he would send someone to pick it up shortly”, their guy said and then quickly added:*

*“Call you back, someone's here!”*

When the phone disconnected, Peter immediately ordered his people to set Plan B in motion. They had spoken with Jones' friend earlier and agreed that setting off the fire alarm was a possible approach. Since the guy was working as a computer engineer, he knew his way around most of the technical installations on the base, and he had worked out a way to hack into the system and set off an alarm in a part of the closed off building. He couldn't control the sprinkler system, though. For those to set off, someone needed to make some smoke or actually light a fire or something close to one of the sprinklers.

Plan B required - and this was the risky part - that one of the agents made it unseen to a designated meeting point just outside the base to hand over a smoke grenade to Jones' friend, who then again had to set this off and get away from “the scene”, before the sprinkler system registered the smoke.

*“How are we doing on the warrants?”*, Peter barked.

*“Nothing from Agent Garner yet”, Diana replied ready to call their colleague for an update.*

When the phone rang once again, Jones reached out to push the button to answer on speaker, just as before. Everyone in the room quieted down, and Diana left to make the call to Agent Garner. When Jones hit the button, he looked puzzled. The phone kept ringing?!

*“It's mine!”*, Peter said, fishing his phone out of his inside jacket pocket.

His phone display said “unknown number”, and his thoughts immediately went to Mozzie and the hospital, fearing that the little guy’s health had deteriorated.

“Agent Burke!”, he said when answering, almost expecting the worst.

“Hello Agent Burke, this is Corporal Robinson from Tobyhanna Army Depot. I’m calling on behalf of Captain Brooks and Major Jenkins to set up a meeting”, the man on the other end explained.

“A meeting?”, Peter asked slightly surprised, signaling to Jones to trace the call.

Diana came back into the now silent room, and she saw a very confused looking Peter on the phone, while Jones typed excessively on the computer. She looked questioningly from one to the other. Jones shrugged, but Peter just held up his hand, indicating he needed something to write on. Diana quickly found a pen and some paper, and Peter started scribbling.

“Yes Sir!”, the corporal continued. “Captain Brooks said they would need to go over some details for the upcoming week and would need to meet with you as soon as possible.”

On the paper Peter wrote the names he’d been given during the conversation and pointed in the direction of the base. His agents immediately looked for information and files on the people indicated in Peter’s notes.

“Where and when should this meeting take place?”, Peter asked, now sounding more like he knew what it was all about, but before he got an answer from the corporal, he heard yelling in the background.

“To the major’s office...? But the captain...”, the man on the phone said to someone else.

“Corporal?”, Peter asked.

“Sorry Sir, just a moment!”, the corporal replied.

Peter heard more voices, more yelling in the background, but just as he was about to ask what was going on, he heard a female voice say “Idiot!”, and then the call was disconnected.

“What the hell was that?”, Jones asked as soon as Peter was off the phone.

“I don’t know... A corporal calling from the base wanting to set up a meeting with this Major Jenkins and Captain Bro...”, Peter stopped himself.

“Brooks! That was Neal’s name in Wit-Sec! It must be... oh... And Rachel, I’m sure I heard Rachel in the background”, Peter suddenly realized what he’d heard.

He quickly relayed what had been said on the phone and what he had heard right before the connection went dead, and since only results on the major’s name turned up in their searches, they all felt pretty sure that this was Neal’s doing, and that Captain Brooks didn’t exist.

*"Do we have probable cause?"*, Diana asked.

*"Even if we don't"*, Peter answered, *"we for sure has reasonable suspicion that Neal is on the compound, and he is - after all - a convicted felon on a work-release deal without his tracking anklet!"*

*"We go?"*, Jones asked while almost already on his way out the door.

*"We go!"*, Peter confirmed.

---

Neal pushed the window all the way up, climbed over the frame, and his right foot touched the ground outside the very same second he heard his pursuers barge through the door to the office. He was more than halfway out the window, when he felt someone grab his left leg. Neal kicked and pulled, and fought with everything he had. He lashed out with his arm and actually hit someone square in the face.

But fighting blind and two against one was destined to fail, and it did. They had a hold on both his leg and his arm, and even though Neal kept struggling, he could feel himself being pulled back into the office.

He landed on the floor, just beneath the window, and felt a burning sensation from the rug on his back when he was dragged further into the room. A fist hit his temple, and for a moment Neal thought he would black out.

*"You stupid fool, Neal!"*, he heard Rachel almost growling, before he was roughly turned around on his stomach and felt someone putting all their weight on his upper back, holding him down. He could hardly breathe, his face pressed into the rug, a knee on his neck.

*"Get off me!"*, he hissed and struggled a little more, before someone managed to get a hold on both of his legs and he felt them being strapped together tightly.

A few seconds later the same happened to his hands, and the pressure on his back was released. Neal felt himself being lifted from the floor, and in no gentle way he was carried back to his former cell.

*"Just leave him on the floor, I got it from here"*, Rachel said to the people who'd helped her find Neal.

*"Are you sure, Ms Turner?"*, one of the men asked.

*"I can handle him"*, Rachel stated and added. *"But if you could tell my father that I'd like for him to come and see me, I'll appreciate it."*

*"Yes, of course - I'll let him know right away"*, the same man said, before they both left the room.

Before Neal had time to get his bearings, Rachel landed a well-placed kick in his stomach. Neal curled up, expecting another blow any second, but it didn't come. Instead Rachel grabbed his head with both her hands and almost whispered into his ear:



*"I hate to inform you that Corporal Robinson is no longer among us, Neal. Lesson one in the "Learning to love"-class: If you involve anyone in your attempts to leave me, they die!"*

"You... You killed him?", Neal could hardly get himself to ask the question, he pretty much already knew the answer to.

"No, Neal... YOU killed him!", Rachel stated, before she leaned down and kissed him.

Neal pulled away as best as he could, as he almost spit out: "Screw you, Rachel. You're insane!"

Apparently Rachel chose to only hear the first part. She laughed a little. Then she let go of Neal's head and got up.

*"I'd like that, sweetie, but not now. I don't think we're quite there yet. Besides... It seems like we still have a problem, we need to take care of. I have a feeling that Burke is on his way after that call",* Rachel said.

*"I hear you boyfriend had an adventure!",* Colonel Turner said entering the room, and he continued:

*"How much of an adventure, did he go on? Do we need to take precautions?"*

*"I'm afraid we do, dad",* Rachel said and explained to her father what had happened.

Neal listened to the way Rachel coldly explained that she'd had to kill Corporal Robinson, and that it seemed like Neal might have gotten a message through to Peter. Neal heard them walk out of the room, and the rest of the conversation was made in the hallway with the door closed. He couldn't hear anything but muffled voices.

It didn't take long, though, before Rachel came back, and Neal felt his blood run cold, when she said in the most callous voice:

*"The medic is on his way. I don't want to hurt you, sweetie, but he can patch you up, and you need to learn about "love and honor". You didn't honor my trust by staying put as I told you, and for that you will be punished."*

---

## CHAPTER 28

Mozzie had been sleeping for a while, but woke up feeling better. He had hardly opened his eyes, before his phone rang. He grabbed it immediately, expecting it to be Peter calling with an update.

"Talk to me, Suit!", he said answering the phone.

"Mozzie, we got a call from the base, a message from Neal. It's enough to grant us the right to go in", Peter explained.

Mozzie breathed a sigh of relief.

*"Is he okay? When will you go in?"*, he asked, slightly anxious.

*"Very soon, we're getting ready now, I just thought I'd let you know - as promised!"*, Peter answered ignoring the question about Neal.

But Mozzie wasn't that easy to deflect:

*"And Neal?"*, he asked again.

*"I don't know, Mozzie, not yet. I didn't talk to him in person. But you know... It's Neal!"*, Peter tried to sound convincing.

They quickly agreed that of course Neal was okay - he did manage to call for help using a cover name after all - and they agreed to be in touch again as soon as the FBI had Neal back in safety.

Mozzie put the phone down, smiled to himself, and then decided to check his contacts for any updates from their side. He preferred to know everything, and if that meant "spying" on the FBI as well, he'd do that.

---

Rachel dragged Neal by his feet across the room.

*"Get on your knees"*, she commanded and hoisted him upwards.

With both his hands and feet bound, Neal couldn't do much but let Rachel manhandle him into a position that had his upper body leaning towards what Neal figured was the bed he had been lying on earlier. She put a hand on the back of his head and pushed forward, until his neck was bent over the bed. He struggled, both from the uncomfortable position and because the hard floor wasn't exactly gentle on his knees.

*"You're insane, Rebecca... Rachel"*, he grumbled into the mattress, while he felt a strap going around his neck. She tightened it enough to keep him in position, but not enough to strangle him. At least not as long as he was still on his knees. He tested if he could turn his head, but the strap was too tight.

*"Let me go, goddammit!"*, Neal raised his voice. *"If you think I'll ever love you after this, you're more messed up than... Oooow!"*

Neal hadn't been paying attention to what Rachel was doing, and so it came as a huge surprise when he suddenly felt an immense pain across his arms and back.

*"What the he... Aaaarh!"*

Once again a burning pain across his hands where they were tied together. Neal's breathing picked up, and this time he heard a cracking sound, before he felt another burning pain over his upper back, quickly followed by another one mostly hitting his arms. She was whipping him, Neal realized, and whatever she used hurt like hell every time.

*"Do you love me, Neal?"*, she asked after the fifth whip.

“What?!” , Neal could hardly believe his own ears. Of course he didn't love her!

Crack!

“Oow!”, Neal couldn't hold back when the whip hit him again, and the tip snaked around his torso.

“Wrong answer, Neal!”, Rachel stated.

She whipped him across the back four more times, before she said anything again:

*“I really and truly love you, sweetie. Why do you do this to me? I just want you to love me... again. Like you did. I want to be with you!”*

Neal's mind was blurry and his breathing ragged, and Rachel's words didn't really register, until she ran her hand through his hair, bent down and kissed him on the temple.

“Do this to YOU?”, Neal said in surprise still trying to catch his breath.

“Do you love me, Neal?”, Rachel asked again, gently moving strands of hair away from his face.

“No!”, Neal stated - short and clear.

He simply couldn't make himself say anything else.

“Do you honor me?”, Rachel asked next.

Neal almost laughed at that ridiculous question.

*“No, Rachel, I don't honor you, I don't love - as a matter of fact I'm beginning to hate you. No. Scratch that. I DO hate you. I hate you. I hate your father. I hate MY father! And I hate what all of you have done to people I love, people I care for, and I hate what you've done to my life.”*

Neal just couldn't hold back anymore. He needed to say these things, hoping that he could talk some sense into Rachel, making her realize that they would never again be a couple.

She kept stroking his hair, kissed him again, before she stood back up.

“I'm sorry”, she almost whispered.

Neal braced himself for more pain, but when it hit him as lightning spreading from his feet all the way through his body, he could only gasp and try to breathe through it. Almost impossible. If the whipping of his back had hurt, it was nothing compared to the stinging pain on his foot soles that raised as a burning sensation, all the way up his legs, back and into his brain.

She whipped him again and again, and Neal quickly lost count. Each time hurt worse than the one before. His feet didn't get used to the pain - on the contrary. He couldn't

think, he couldn't breathe, he couldn't get away. When she finally stopped, Neal didn't even notice at first. His body was like a pool of electrocuted jelly, and each nerve was buzzing and burning. And he couldn't breathe.

He couldn't breathe, because he could no longer keep himself up on his knees, and the strap around his neck had become a noose.

Rachel opened the door to the hallway and let in the medic who had been waiting outside.

*"Don't strangle yourself, sweetie"*, Rachel said when she came back and saw how Neal was slumped next to the bed.

She released the strap, and the two of them lifted Neal up and placed him on his stomach on the bed. His cheeks were wet from tears, and his entire body was soaked in sweat, but even when the medic started caring for the welts on his back and cleaning the few places with open wounds, he hardly noticed. The only thing that went through Neal's mind at the time was pleading. *Come and get me, Peter, please come and get me.*

---

The agents were divided into several smaller teams entering the base from various points, armed and ready. Peter knew that his team was well prepared, and the primary teams - including Peter, Jones and Diana - headed for the secluded building that had been pointed out by Jones' contact on the base.

They had been informed that at least 28 people would be working in or around the building they needed to get to. Many more in the others, but with the help of their inside men, these uninteresting buildings were quickly "neutralized" in such a way that each team leader in a fairly calm way could inform the personnel what was going on.

They feared that entering a military base could cause havoc, but fortunately all soldiers they met on their way were also trained to take orders, and since it was mostly a depot, the personnel wasn't really reacting with drawn weapons, but had enough common sense to find out what was going on before rushing into a fight with blazing guns. Except from a few who were obviously on guard...

A few shots were fired, shouts were heard, and on the radio Peter continuously received updates, but even after 5 minutes, they still hadn't cleared the entire base and had had no sight of Neal, Colonel Turner or Rachel. Peter was afraid that they were too late. That they had somehow managed to leave the base without the FBI noticing.

*"No"*, he said to himself. *"They haven't. They are here, Neal is here!"*

*"What did you say?"*, Jones asked.

He was right next to Peter and had clearly heard him mumbling, but Peter just looked at him, shook his head and signaled for Jones to keep going.

---

Rachel was gently stroking Neal's hair, while the medic cleaned the cuts, when she heard commotion outside. She quickly went to the door and stepped out into the hallway

where she almost bumped into one of her father's men.

*"We gotta move, Ms. Turner. Colonel's order"*, he said in a loud voice.

*"What's going on?"*, Rachel asked, turning around and heading straight towards Neal.

She cut his feet free, the medic quickly moved out of the way and packed up everything to avoid leaving any blood traces behind.

*"Intruders on the base!"*, the soldier briefly explained, before he helped Rachel get Neal on his feet. Well, kind of anyway. They held him upright together, one on each side, but they had to carry him more than he walked. Neal hissed in pain.

Not far down the hallway they were met by Rachel's father and his 1<sup>st</sup> in command who took over for Rachel, securing a faster speed.

*"We have a Humvee prepared"*, her father told her. *"You should wear this!"*

He handed her a helmet and a bulletproof vest which she put on while still on the move. Within a couple of minutes they reached the vehicle which was parked in a huge building connected to the office building they came from.

*"Clever!"*, Rachel exclaimed when she saw the ambulance model of the Humvee.

The Colonel climbed in, and the two soldiers roughly shoved Neal in afterward, in the same second as the doors blasted open. Shouts, drawn guns - and through it all, Rachel heard the well-known voice of Peter Burke.

*"FBI! Don't move!"*

The following 30 seconds were chaotic. Shots were fired, people were shouting, the engine of the Humvee started roaring, and suddenly Rachel felt herself being tackled to the ground.

*"Rachel Turner, you're under arrest... again!"*, Diana said and cuffed Rachel's hands.

Rachel looked around, she struggled to get free, until her eyes focused on her dad in the vehicle.

*"No one can have him"*, she yelled.

*"Shut up!"*, Diana commanded.

*"Dad!"*, Rachel continued, her focus was on her father only.

*"If I can't have him, no one can!"*, she yelled.

From the Humvee Colonel Turner watched his daughter being pushed to the ground, he watched his right hand man get shot, and he knew they'd lost the battle, unless he did something now. He locked eyes with his baby girl, lying on the floor, yelling at him, and he knew he would fulfill his daughter's wish - as he always did.

*“Step out of the vehicle”*, someone shouted.

*“Neal!”*, Peter yelled.

He could see the shape of the younger man in the back of the ambulance, and as in slow motion he watched Colonel Turner pull Neal close with an arm around his chest, and in one swift motion he drew a knife and held it to Neal's throat.

*“Drop the knife!”*, Peter yelled. *“You have nowhere to go!”*

*“Let my daughter go, or I'll kill him”*, the colonel responded.

*“I'll shoot, if you don't drop the knife right now”*, was Peter's immediate response.

He saw Jones and another agent move around the front of the vehicle, obviously trying to get in and take the colonel down from behind.

Peter tried to get eye contact with Neal, tried to communicate to him what was about to happen, but Neal didn't even look his way.

*“Neal, are you alright?”*, Peter asked, quickly followed by, *“Don't do anything rash, Colonel”*, as he saw Rachel's father tighten his grip on Neal, and Neal squeezed his eyes shut a few times.

*“Drop your gun, Agent Burke!”*, the colonel yelled back at Peter. *“Drop it, let my daughter go, and I'll let you have him...”*

*“Dad!”*, Rachel yelled, keeping her eyes on her father.

As he looked back at her, she knew her father had no intention of letting Neal go, unless it was with the two of them away from this place. And then she smiled.

Diana noticed the change in Rachel's behavior, the way that she stopped struggling, the devilish smile. Diana looked up and studied the colonel intently.

*“Peter...”*, she said and looked up, *“he's gonna...”*

*“I know!”*, Peter interrupted.

He gently raised his left hand, palm facing the colonel, then the right, slowly moving the gun away from its target.

*“Get your men away!”*, the colonel yelled.

*“Fall back!”*, Peter commanded, and the agents within the colonel's sight all drew back.

*“I need to know that Neal is okay!”*, Peter shouted, still slowly moving into a position so he could place the gun gently on the floor.

---

At first Neal had been too out of it to really realize what was going on around him. He was still in a daze of pain, and everything happened so fast. At one point he heard

Peter's voice break through, and for a second he felt relief, but he was abruptly reminded that nothing was okay yet, when someone grabbed him hard and he felt the cold blade of a knife at his throat.

Yelling. The blade pressing on his throat. More yelling. Neal felt the edge of the knife, sure that it was drawing blood by now, and he pulled backwards into the man behind him to get away from the knife. Pointless, of course.

*"Neal, are you alright?"*, he heard Peter ask, but before Neal could give any answer, he felt the arm tighten around his chest, and he heard a deep growling in his right ear.

*"Don't say a word, or I'll make sure you never say anything again!"*

Neal swallowed (that kind of hurt, too), and tried - as many times before during the last couple of hours - to clear his vision by blinking hard. It didn't work.

Peter and Rachel's father kept shouting back and forth, until Neal heard Peter apparently give in. But the FBI didn't negotiate with kidnappers? Neal knew that, though he still found it hard to think straight. So why did Peter ask the crew to fall back?

*"I need to know that Neal is okay!"*, he heard Peter shout.

Neal wanted to tell him no... He wasn't really okay. He felt like shit, he hurt all over, he couldn't see, and he was so tired... So incredibly exhausted.

*"Answer him. Tell him you're fine"*, the colonel said in a low voice that only Neal could hear. *"Now!"*

Neal felt the blade nick the skin on his throat again.

*"I'm fine, Peter!"*, he said in a croaky voice, but with a minuscule shake of his head.

For a moment, Neal wondered what had happened to his voice, and why just those few words were hard on his throat. It felt rough.

---

Peter watched Neal carefully and was surprised to hear him speak. It sounded nothing like the usual Neal. In fact everything about Neal's appearance seemed unusual. Of course it was to be expected that after having been kidnapped for more than 30 hours and brought across state lines on the way, you wouldn't be all chatty and witty. But Peter didn't miss that he still hadn't had eye contact with Neal. He didn't miss the tiny shake of his head. He didn't miss that Neal's hands were clearly bound behind his back. And he most certainly didn't miss that it was clearly the colonel who held Neal upright.

Peter knelt down and placed the gun on the floor, before he slowly got up again, and signaled to Diana to help Rachel up.

Diana followed her boss' lead, got Rachel back on her feet - still cuffed though - and moved a few steps backwards.

*"I'm letting her go, my men have moved away, I've dropped my gun - now it's your turn"*, Peter said, keeping a watchful eye on every twitch of a muscle from the colonel.

He fully trusted that Diana was still in control of Rachel, though she had moved away a little. He also knew that Diana from that position would be able to see Jones and their colleague.

*“I’ll let him go when Rachel is with me”,* the colonel replied.

In his ear piece he heard the low whispering voice of Jones.

*“Ready, Peter!”*

Peter watched the colonel, took one small step backward, and told Rachel to slowly walk towards the vehicle. Peter saw the colonel loosen his grip on Neal, and the knife was no longer pressed to the neck of his C.I. Peter took another small step backward, as Rachel walked a few steps closer to her father, and the knife was lowered another inch. Peter nodded, and behind him he, heard Diana pass on the message:

*“Boss says go!”*

Jones and the other agent set into action. They pulled open the door in the side of the ambulance, entering from behind the colonel, who quickly turned around to see what was happening. Due to his blindness and his general physical state, Neal became extremely dizzy from the sudden, quick movement, and just as everything around him started spinning like a wheel of fortune on double speed, he felt the knife go straight to his throat. He heard a shot, and everything went dark.

---

## CHAPTER 29

The shot rang out from Jones' gun and for a few seconds everything was chaos: The colonel falling backwards, pulling Neal down, everyone shouting, Diana rushing toward Rachel, holding her back, Jones kicking away the knife while still training his gun at the colonel, their colleague pulling out handcuffs.

And Peter? Peter ran with the speed of light toward the ambulance.

*“NEEAAL!! Diana, get the paramedics!”*, he screamed and thanked the team for preparing well and already having paramedics on stand-by.

The colonel was on the floor of the ambulance, gripping tight at the bullet wound in his right arm, while the FBI agent got ready to cuff him, having no mercy on the wounded man. Jones helped pull him up and get him out of the Humvee ambulance.

Right next to the colonel was Neal, and Peter bent down, fearing the worst. He saw blood on his face, blood on his neck, bruises... Peter pressed his fingers to Neal's throat and felt for a pulse. It was there - and steady. Peter shook his shoulder gently, but Neal was unconscious. The blood was seeping from cuts on Neal's throat and temple, nothing serious, Peter thought, but why was Neal unresponsive? When he saw blood on the corner of a metal box on the floor right next to Neal, he soon figured that Neal must have hit his head in the fall and was knocked out.

*“Paramedics will be here in 2 minutes”,* Diana said while climbing into the ambulance.

*“How's he doing, Peter?”*



Peter was just about to explain what he had realized so far, when Neal started groaning.

*“Neal? Neal, look at me”*, Peter said, when he saw Neal opening his eyes a little.

*“Can't”*, Neal said in a raspy voice and slowly shook his head a little.

*“What do you mean 'can't?’”*, Peter asked a little confused.

*“Let's cut his hands free”*, Diana said and prepared to roll Neal over, while Peter took out his pocket knife to cut the ties.

*“Can't see...”*, Neal mumbled.

*“You can't...? Wait!”*, Peter exclaimed in the very second, Diana started pushing Neal to get access to his hands.

*“Don't move him... He hit his head on that one”*, Peter said and nodded his head in the direction of the box, *“and if he's bleeding and can't see, it could be serious.”*

Diana gently let go of Neal so not to cause any more damage. Neal shook his head more clearly this time, and when Peter started telling him to lay still and not move, Neal interrupted.

*“My head is fine. Rachel did it, she blinded me...”*

Before Peter and Diana could register Neal's words, the paramedics climbed into the ambulance, and both of them quickly moved out of the way, while Peter started explaining what he knew so far.

*“... hit his head, and now he can't see, he says”*, Peter finished.

Neal felt compelled to explain again, even though he felt bone tired by now, and just wanted to curl in and sleep and forget about the pain.

*“No, not because I hit my head”*, Neal sighed and continued. *“She injected me with something. Blurred my vision. I see lights and shades.”*

*“How is that possible?”*, Peter asked, and while one paramedic asked Neal about his name, shone a light in his eyes and checked his pupils, the other one brought out a neck brace and started explaining that there were certain ways to numb the eye for surgery, and some of these could cause temporary lack of vision.

*“She said it was temporary”*, Neal added, now sounding slightly more aware.

*“Please, just cut my hands free”*, he pleaded, feeling pain from the pressure that his own weight put on his abused hands, arms and wrists by lying on them.

*“Just a second, Sir”*, the one paramedic said. *“We're gonna wrap the cut on your throat, it doesn't look serious, but it is still bleeding, and then put this one on you to support your neck, just as a precaution, before moving you. Alright?”*

*“My head is fine, I said”*, Neal sighed, but the paramedics continued cleaning away some of the blood before putting on a bandage. He hesitated for a second when he saw the bruises around Neal's neck.

*“Sir, did someone try to strangle you?”*, he asked

The question made Peter's heart speed up for a moment, and he crouched down as close to Neal as possible to see what caused the paramedic to ask the question.

*“He's got some bruises around his neck”*, the paramedic informed his partner. *“Look very much like strangulation marks.”*

*“It's okay”*, Neal rasped and shook his head.

*“Please keep your head still”*, the one paramedic said and immediately grabbed a hold on both sides of Neal's head to keep him still, before his partner strapped the neck brace in place.

*“Neal, it's not okay. YOU definitely don't look okay”*, Peter said and added: *“Just relax and let the paramedics do their work, okay?”*

Before Neal managed to argue that he would be just fine as soon as he could see and feel his hands again, the paramedics gently rolled him onto his side to cut his hands free. He hissed slightly, and even though he tried to hide the pain he was feeling, it didn't escape Peter that Neal had to be in a lot more pain than he expressed. As soon as Peter saw the welts on Neal's back, the raw wrists, and the hands that had a slight purplish tingle due to lack of blood circulation, he knew that Neal most definitely wasn't okay.

When Neal felt his hands being released, it was such a relief to finally being able to move again that he drew in a deep breath and just had to voice his gratitude.

*“Thanks”*, he said and started getting himself into a seated position.

The paramedics tried to hold him back, politely asking him to stay still until they'd assessed all his injuries, but Neal needed to move, he needed to get up, he needed to rub his eyes, and he needed to just be for a moment.

Since the adrenaline was wearing off, the various pains came sneaking up on him, and so did all of the last - what? 2 days? 3 days? It sure felt like that, but Neal knew that it probably wasn't even 2 whole days.

*“Neal, let them do their work!”*, Peter ordered.

*“No, I'm okay... I just...”*, Neal still tried to get up, almost getting ready to fight the paramedics if they kept holding him down.

He felt the prick of a needle in his right arm and knew that if he didn't cooperate and stated his arguments clearly, it would soon be a lost cause.

He relaxed for a moment, let himself fall back and said:

*“Look, yeah... It hurts... like everywhere, and I WILL let you check me out, okay? I just really need to get off my back, get up and... Please, just give me a breather. I'm not dying, I'm not seriously hurt or anything. Just give me a break”.*

Toward the end of his plead, Neal had almost no voice left, which puzzled him a little. He didn't feel like he'd caught a cold or anything, so why his voice was giving up on him, he didn't know.

But it had worked. He felt a gentle hand on his shoulder, when Peter said:

*“Let him breathe, guys”.*

And aimed at the paramedics he asked: *“Will it hurt him in any way if he sits up?”*

*“Probably not. As long as he keeps the neck brace on, and he moves slowly and avoid sudden movements. I don't expect him to have any spinal damage judged from his reactions, movements and the information we have - so far anyway”,* the paramedics answered and shot a glance in the direction of Neal.

Neal started pushing him self upwards again, and Peter supported him lightly.

*“Sir, please let us know if you start feeling dizzy, if you feel nauseous, and most importantly where you're hurt... the most, I should probably add”,* the paramedics told him.

*“My colleague has put in an I.V., so we can relieve your pain if needed, but at first we're only giving you saline, okay?”*, he explained, and the other paramedic continued.

*“I kept your hands free, so we can treat them.”*

When he finally made it into a decent sitting position on the floor of the ambulance, Neal rubbed his eyes and groaned. He looked toward the dim light that was the only thing he could really see and blinked a few times, before he sensed a shadow moving in front of him.

*“You really can't see?”*, Peter asked, sounding a little worried.

*“No... Wish I could say that it's good to see you again, Peter, but I really can't...”*

Neal's voice was not much more than a whisper.

Peter looked at the paramedics and asked how long such numbing of the eyes would usually last.

*“It's hard to say”,* the paramedic answered, shrugging a little. *“It all depends on how it was done and what kind of anesthetic they used, but my guess would be nothing more than a few hours. You'll find out when we get him to the hospital and have an ophthalmologist look at his eyes.”*

Peter gripped Neal's shoulder gently.

*“Just have to be patient, Neal... and I know that's one of your biggest strengths,*

*right?”*, Peter said, and the irony of that phrase stood out like a Times Square neon sign wrongly placed in a small village.

*“Now Sir”*, the paramedics took over again. *“Here’s some water. Try taking a few sips. If someone tried strangling you, that could cause your throat to be sore. Please tell us where you hurt.”*

Neal took a few sips, and the cold water felt good on his throat. In as few words as possible he told them, that what hurt the most at the moment were his feet, his wrists and his back. When Peter found out that Neal had been whipped not just on his back, but also on his feet, he felt the anger boiling in him.

*“That’s torture!”*, he exclaimed unable to hold himself back. He stomped out of the ambulance, called for Diana and told her in uncertain terms that as long as Rachel Turner and her father were in the custody of the FBI they would be treated according to whatever rules applied of course, but no one - and he repeated no one - should give them any kind of caring treatment. Just the absolute minimum.

When he returned to the ambulance, the paramedics were helping Neal to get seated on a gurney. Both of his hands were wrapped in bandages, but he was still clumsily holding on to the water bottle.

When they wheeled him out, Peter caught up with them and put his hand on Neal’s arm to let him know that he was there.

*“I’m coming with you. Diana and Jones will handle everything here”*, he said.

Neal didn’t respond at first, and the paramedics explained that they had given him something for the pain, and it could make him drowsy. Peter was about to take the bottle from Neal’s hands so he didn’t drop it in his sleep, but Neal held on to it. He opened his eyes, and Peter’s worry returned when he noticed the lack of life in these usually sparkling baby blues.

*“I’m awake”*, Neal said quietly, and Peter let go of the bottle again.

When they were in the back of the real ambulance and heading toward the nearest medical center which was a 7 minute ride away, Neal spoke again.

*“Peter?”*, he asked, this time not even bothering to open his eyes.

*“Yeah, I’m here”*, Peter said from his seat by Neal’s feet. He reached out and put his hand on top of the blanket that was wrapped around Neal.

*“Did you... by any chance...?”*

Neal seemed hesitant asking the question that was on his mind and Peter prodded.

*“Did I what?”*

*“Did you... find Mozzie yet? They shot him... in the house”*, Neal continued.

He wanted to know, yet he didn’t want to know... Especially not if Mozzie was dead. He

had seen him go down, he saw the wound, and the last time Neal caught a glimpse of his friend, he could've possibly already been dead.

*"We did", Peter answered. "They set the house on fire, when we got there..."*

Neal's jaw dropped, but before he managed to say more, Peter hurriedly continued.

*"... but Mozzie made it out in time on his own. We found him behind the house, got him to the hospital, and he's alright, Neal. He's alright... and probably already knows - through his very alternative ways of retrieving information - that we have found you, too", Peter mused at the end, and a few seconds later added.*

*"He even helped us during the investigation. From his hospital bed, refusing to not be a part of your rescue, but demanding that I got him a new, unwrapped burner phone."*

That brought out a tiny smile on Neal's face. Only Mozzie, he thought, only Mozzie...

The paramedic riding in the back with Neal checked his vitals again and asked him to rate his pain on a scale of 1-10, 10 being the worst. Neal said 2, but when the ambulance at the same time hit a bump in the road, and the light jostling caused another groan from Neal, the paramedic asked:

*"2?"*

*"Maybe a little more", Neal answered.*

*"How much more?", the paramedic wanted to know.*

Neal shrugged, but when they hit another bump and an "oow" escaped his lips, the paramedic asked again.

*"How much?"*

*"... 7... I guess", Neal said silently.*

*"7??", Peter repeated like he didn't believe his own ears. "Dammit Neal, just be honest for once, okay? If you're in pain, then say so, for Heaven's sake!"*

The paramedic simply injected some more pain relief into Neal's I.V. and told him that it would help soon. Peter frowned.

They drove in silence a few minutes, but right as the paramedic who was driving announced that they were at the medical center, Peter's phone rang.

---

## CHAPTER 30

Mozzie was anxious. His sources had told him that "something" had happened on the base, but he still hadn't heard from Peter - or Neal for that matter. He pulled out the phone Peter had gotten him and dialed the agent's number, hoping that he didn't disturb the rescue mission.

He heard the phone ring twice, before Peter answered.

*“This is Burke!”*

*“Suit!”,* Mozzie said and quickly continued: *“Did you find him? Are you at the base? What happened? You said you’d keep me updated! But of course, what can I expect from a suit?”*

*“Mozzie! Mozzie! Relax!”*, Peter interrupted Mozzie's flow of words.

*“Neal is right here. We found him. We’re on the way to the local medical center, but he is ... uhm... He’s okay!”*, Peter said.

Mozzie breathed a sigh of relief. Finally! Yet he could still hear the slight hesitance in Peter's answer.

*“How “okay” is he, Suit? Can I talk to him? Let me talk to him!”*, Mozzie demanded.

He heard a bit of shuffling, and then he heard Neal's voice. Or at least he thought it was Neal's voice.

*“Mozz... I’m fine”*, Neal said in a very rough voice that clearly indicated he wasn't all that fine.

*“Are YOU alright?”*, Neal asked instead.

Mozzie uttered a few yes'es and assurances, while he heard another voice in the background and Neal taking a deep breath before he continued.

*“I have to go, Mozz. We’re at the hospi... medical... whatever. I’ll call you later.”*

The line disconnected, and Mozzie looked at the phone. Neal hadn't argued about being on his way to a hospital, he had sounded very off and very tired. Mozzie shook his head. Three obvious signs that Neal was anything but fine.

The phone call hadn't really made Mozzie less anxious, but he was still happy to know that at least his friend was now safe and out of the clutches of the Turner Family. He smiled to himself and settled back on the pillow. Suddenly he realized how awfully tired he himself was, and the pain in his side was actually bugging him. Mozzie hated hospitals, but at this very moment he was kind of glad they existed. To take care of Neal of course. Mozzie could've taken care of himself if he really had to, but now he would take the opportunity of his present location and take a long and well-needed nap. He knew that it would be a while anyway before Neal would call him back.

Mozzie drifted off, still with the phone in his hand, but with a less worried expression on his face than he'd had for the last 30 hours or more.

---

When Neal was wheeled into the emergency room, Peter was held back by a nurse who told him that he couldn't go in. Peter flashed his badge, but the nurse just took him calmly by his arm and let him to a chair, pushed him down gently and pressed a clip

board with some papers into his hands instead.

*“Sir! Agent...”, she said, “if you would please fill out these forms to the best of your ability, the doctor and nurses will take good care of your partner.”*

*“But I need to be with him”, Peter said looking up at the nurse who was smiling politely.*

*“You will be... In a little while. Just give the doctor a little time to asses his injuries, and we'll come get you as soon as possible. The papers are important, too”, she added. “Please fill them out”.*

Peter nodded, sighed deeply and looked at the papers in front of him. He had been searching for Neal for - he looked at his watch - about 34 hours, and just as he found him, he was pretty much taken away from him again. Peter wiped his hand over his face and tried to reassure himself that everything was alright now. Neal was safe, his injuries hopefully not that serious, Mozzie was okay, and it would only be a matter of time - hopefully a short time - before Peter would be able to go back to Neal. Of course he knew that the doctors and nurses needed room and no “annoying” relatives disturbing their work.

Relatives? Peter stopped his own line of thoughts for a moment. Where did that come from? He smiled faintly. Maybe he and El really had become Neal's extended family.

Still with a smile on his lips, Peter grabbed the pen attached to the clip board and started filling out the papers. According to Neal's deal with the FBI, Peter was actually Neal's “medical proxy”, so of course he should take upon him this task and fill out the papers properly and quickly, so the medical center had all the information needed to treat Neal the best way possible.

A few minutes later Peter went to the nurse's desk, handed over the paperwork and much calmer than before asked the nurse for any updates on Neal.

The nurse looked at him, smiling, but she shook her head. No news yet.

---

Neal felt confused. Everything happened so fast, and before he knew of it he was moved from the gurney to an examination table, and people started prodding and poking at him. He was dizzy, nauseated, and all in all not really feeling too good.

*“Can you tell me your name, Sir?”*, a male voice asked.

Neal tried nodding, but the neck brace kept him from moving much.

*“Neal Ca ...”*, he swallowed, feeling the taste of bile in his mouth.

*“I'm-gonna-be-sick”*, he said almost as in one word and leaned to his right so quickly that it made his head spin.

*“An emesis basin!”*, the male voice commanded.

Neal felt a hand on his shoulder and something under his chin at the same moment as he started vomiting. Yuck! He really hated the taste and smell of vomit. He usually also

hated the sight of it, almost even more, but fortunately he didn't have that issue to deal with, as his vision was still blurred. Always look at the bright side, he thought, while trying to make his stomach settle.

After a couple of minutes of dry heaving and Neal trying to breath through it all, he started feeling better. He leaned back onto the examination table, and someone asked him if he wanted some water. Neal felt a paper cup pushed into his hand.

*"Drink slowly and only a few sips",* a female voice said.

Neal complied and handed the cup back to the woman whose shape he could see clearly due to the bright light in the room. It was a little comforting, now that he thought about it.

The following minutes were mostly Neal trying to answer the questions the doctor - who introduced himself as Dr. Catalano - asked, but the more Neal said, the more his voice kept failing.

The doctor shone a light in his eyes, apparently not really happy about the reactions of the pupils.

*"Your vital signs are pretty much okay. You have a little fever, your oxygen level is a little low, but considering what you've been through, your numbers are expected and actually a little on the good side",* Dr. Catalano said.

*"However",* he continued, *"your pupils aren't reacting as I would like them to. If it's because of the numbing of your eyes or a possible concussion is hard to say at this time. The paramedics said you lost consciousness for a brief period of time which is always a reason to be cautious. We'll need to give the cut on your temple a couple of stitches - it's still bleeding - and I need to look at your throat, too, but first I want to send you to x-rays."*

Neal had a hard time keeping up with the explanation from the doctor, and he felt really tired by now. He realized too late that the doctor had asked him a question.

*"Neal? Will that be okay?"*, the doctor asked again.

*"Sorry, what?"*, Neal asked. *"Please, talk to Peter."*

Neal closed his eyes. Though he thought his vision was clearing a little, the bright light was bugging him.

*"Who's Peter?"*, the doctor asked.

*"FBI",* Neal answered drowsy. *"My friend",* he added.

He heard a nurse explain to the doctor that an FBI Agent had been with Neal and was waiting for updates in the waiting room, but Neal drifted off after that and he didn't notice the doctor leaving the room for a moment to talk to Peter, while one nurse cleaned Neal's head wound and another tended to his wrists and hands.

---



When the doctor came to the waiting room and called out Peter's name, Peter nearly shot up from the chair and were at the doctor's side in a split second.

After a brief introduction between the two, the doctor explained about Neal's injuries so far: stitches needed on his temple, most likely on both wrists, too - he would know that for sure when he got back and examined the cleaned cuts - but the welts on his back and the cuts and scrapes on his feet would just need some bandages and a some ointment to avoid any infections.

What he was most worried about was Neal's hoarseness, nausea and the reaction of his pupils which could all be caused by a moderate strangulation, but the nausea and vomiting could also be due to a concussion, especially considering that he'd blacked out after hitting his head. The doctor asked Peter for permission to take Neal to x-ray and further examination of his throat and head. Depending on how severe the strangulation had been, Neal could even have suffered brain damage.

*"Brain damage??"*, Peter asked almost shocked.

*"Don't worry about that just yet"*, the doctor said in a calm voice. *"I don't expect any serious damage. Neal has been far too clear headed even with a minor concussion, but I'd like to rule out any invisible damage to his brain, his vocal chords and so on. I need to check for possible swellings."*

Peter nodded understandingly and quickly gave the doctor permission to perform any examination needed as long as he made sure Neal would be okay.

*"Can I see him? Just for a moment?"*, Peter asked, trying to sound less pleading than he felt.

Dr. Catalano smiled and nodded.

*"Come with me, and you'll have a few minutes before we wheel him off to x-rays, but be aware that he might be sleeping."*

Peter didn't care if Neal was asleep or awake, as long as he could see him and make sure that he really was going to be okay soon. In the back of his head, though, he couldn't help worrying about the term "brain damage" that the doctor had just thrown out there like it was just a sprained ankle.

While following the doctor to Neal's cubicle, Peter suddenly remembered the purplish look of Neal's hands when they were freed from their bonds.

*"How about his hands?"*, Peter asked the doctor, knowing that Neal would probably worry the most about any damage to the hands as they were his primary tools when creating arts and crafts - or forgeries, Peter reminded himself.

*"Are they alright? No damage from lack of blood flow or anything?"*

The doctor pointed to their right, leading Peter to Neal's bedside where a nurse was tending to the problem in question. Neal seemed to be sleeping, but the nurse spoke up when she saw the doctor returning.

*"I think they might need stitches, too",* she said and made room for the doctor to come closer.

*"Thank you",* the doctor said to the nurse as he took over the stool and started examining Neal's left hand, and in reply to Peter's question he continued: *"Honestly, we're not sure yet how deep these lacerations are, but from a quick glance, they don't look too bad."*

The doctor nodded at the nurse, who gently woke Neal up.

*"Your friend is here, and the doctor is here to look at your wrists",* she explained to Neal.

*"Peter's here?"*, Neal asked with the awful hoarse voice that Peter had almost forgotten about, and with the speed of a hummingbird's wings words as "damaged vocal chords" and "brain damage" came to the front of Peter's mind.

*"Yeah, I'm here, Neal!"*, Peter said with a smile on his lips.

With his free hand Neal rubbed at his eyes, trying to clear his vision for the umpteenth time. To his surprise he actually felt like it was working this time. It was still far from normal, but he clearly recognized the shape standing close to his feet as Peter, and next to him he saw another person obviously wearing white, and even though Neal's mind was still a little muddled he quickly deduced that it had to be the doctor. Doctor...? Doctor... Whatever his name was. Cantaloupe or something.

*"Cantaloupe is a melon",* Neal whispered to himself, but loud enough for both Peter and Dr. Catalano to hear it.

*"What?"*, Peter asked confused looking from Neal to the doctor and back again.

The doctor frowned and asked Neal a few questions.

*"Neal, do you know where you are?"*

*"Hospital",* Neal asked frowning a little himself.

*"Why?"*, he added.

The doctor explained briefly.

*"You might have a concussion, hence feeling a little disoriented. Do you know what day it is?"*

*"Not really",* Neal answered honestly. *"I lost track of time. It was dark, and they gave me something."*

*"They drugged you?"*, Peter asked anxiously.

*"Yeah",* Neal said.

He rubbed at his eyes again.

*“When will my vision be back to normal”, he asked, clearly impatient.*

*“It might be a little while yet”, the doctor answered truthfully.*

After a deep sigh, Neal opened his mouth to speak again, but the doctor stopped him.

*“You should try not to speak too much. We still need to assess any damage to your neck, throat and vocal chords. Your wrists will need some stitches, but I would like to examine them a little further, too, to make sure there’s no nerve damage. First you’re off to x-rays, though. The orderly will take you there in a minute, and then you’ll be back here, I’ll stitch you up and we’ll find a bed for you.”*

With a quick glance to Peter, Dr. Catalano added:

*“And we’ve taken blood samples already. I’ll ask the lab to check for various drugs.”*

Peter approved of that. And Neal?

Neal groaned. Finding a bed for him meant staying in the hospital. He really just wanted to go home, sleep in his own bed, and forget about everything that had to do with the wackos of the Turner family.

Peter knew what Neal was thinking.

*“It’ll be okay, Neal! I’ll wait for you right here, and as soon as Dr. Catalano gives you the green light, I promise to take you back to New York right away. Just relax until then, let the doctor and nurses take care of you, and you’ll be as good as new in a jiffy.”*

While Peter had been reassuring Neal, the doctor and the nurse had wrapped up his wrists, and a few seconds later the orderly came and wheeled Neal off for further examination.

Peter looked around, not really knowing what to do with himself until a friendly nurse came to his rescue.

*“It’ll be at least an hour, probably more, before your friend is back”, she said.*

*“Why don’t you go back to the waiting room, grab yourself some coffee from the machine. If you need to call anyone, now is a good time. It’s getting late as well. If you’re hungry, you can find sandwiches in one of the vending machines down the hall between the entrance and the waiting room”, she offered.*

*“I promised him I’d wait here”, Peter explained.*

*“I’ll come get you when I get a notification that he’s on his way back here”, the nurse smiled.*

*“Come on”, she said and took Peter by the elbow.*

A few minutes later Peter sat back in one of the chairs in the waiting room with a cup of coffee in one hand and a sandwich in the other. He realized by then how drained he felt.

It had been a couple of long days with almost no sleep. He put the coffee and the sandwich on the table next to him and pulled out his phone. He intended to call El, but looking at the display he noticed that it was almost 1 AM. He'd already called her briefly while he was waiting earlier and instead he sent her a text message:

*Hi hon! Neal is off to X-ray. Spoke to him briefly. He should be fine, but they'll keep him overnight. I bet you'll be happy to read that I'm actually about to eat something now. Talk to you tomorrow - or today, if you're already asleep and don't read this until the morning. P*

Peter hadn't even put his cell back in his pocket before a reply ticked in.

*Been waiting to hear from you, hon. Please call me as soon as you know more. Even if you think I'm sleeping. I'm probably not. Drink some water - don't go too hard on the coffee ;-)* El

Peter smiled. She knew him too well. He typed a short reply back to his wife, promising to call her later. Then he sent Diana a text message asking for any updates before he put the phone away and unwrapped the sandwich. Despite it being from a vending machine, it actually looked quite tasty, and as soon as the smell hit his nostrils, his stomach growled, and Peter realized how hungry he was.

Munching on the food and sipping the somewhat decent coffee, Peter leaned back and prepared himself for a long wait.

---

## CHAPTER 31

Peter startled when he felt a hand gently shaking his shoulder. He had just closed his eyes a couple of minutes after finishing his food and coffee, so he hadn't noticed the approaching nurse who was now standing right in front of him.

*"Your friend is on his way back"*, she said, smiling.

*"Already?"*, Peter asked. *"I thought you said it would be at least an hour..."*

She smiled even bigger.

*"It has been - actually close to 1½. I think you needed that nap"*, she winked at him.

*"Come on"*, she added and turned to head back to the emergency room.

Peter got up and followed her, still feeling a little off after having slept on the uncomfortable chair that he would have sworn would make it impossible for him to fall asleep. Yet, when he checked his watch, he realized the nurse was right, and it was almost 2.30 in the morning.

At the same time as the nurse showed Peter into the cubicle, an orderly wheeled Neal in as well. Peter was happy to see that the neck brace was gone - must be a good sign, he thought.

*"Hey Peter"*, Neal rasped and smiled tiredly, but still with a smile that reached his eyes.

*“Hey yourself”*, Peter answered. *“How are you feeling?”*

Before Neal had the chance to answer, Peter realized that they'd actually had eye contact.

*“Your vision is back!”*, he stated more than he asked.

Neal nodded.

*“Almost anyway...”*, he said.

At the same time Dr. Catalano entered, and he greeted Peter with a satisfied smile.

*“So, Mr. Caffrey...”*, he started. *“I’ve got almost only good news!”*

*“Almost?”*, Peter immediately responded, not missing the little adverb.

Dr. Catalano nodded.

*“Various bruises have been taken care of, but you’ll probably be sore for a couple of days. As you know yourself”*, he said and looked at Neal, *“your vision is pretty much back to normal. Your eyes are still a little sensitive to the light, but that might be connected to the minor concussion that you - as expected - have secured by bumping your head. We’ve stitched up your temple and your wrists, and fortunately the lacerations on neither wrist were deep enough to cause any real damage. You might feel a slight numbness in some of your fingers for a couple of days, but they should heal up just fine. However...”*

Peter sighed inwardly... Oh-oh, here it comes. The not so good news.

The doctor continued:

*“We would like to keep you for observation for a day or two because of your concussion, but mostly because of the strangulation. It doesn’t appear that there’s any serious damage to or swelling in your neck and throat, but your voice is still a little too hoarse for my liking, and the effects of strangulation can show at a later time. As a precaution I’ve asked the nurse to set you up with some oxygen - not a mask, just a nasal cannula.”*

The doctor looked at the papers he was holding, and at the same time the nurse entered with the oxygen equipment.

*“You said that you hadn’t lost consciousness, but do you remember what happened?”*

*“Pain!”*, was all Neal said.

*“Pain?”*, the doctor asked. *“Did you hurt your neck or your throat at the time?”*

Neal shook his head and in his still very rough voice, he explained how everything that had happened at the time had been overruled by the immense pain of the whipping.

*"It was like... I don't know... being electrocuted, I think."*

He shivered when he added with a sigh:

*"I didn't know feet were that sensitive."*

"Feet?", Peter exclaimed.

*"She whipped your feet?? That's..."* Peter swallowed.

*"That's torture!"*, he almost whispered.

The doctor pulled the blanket away from Neal's feet and examined them, realizing that no-one had looked at Neal's feet at all, and though there weren't any welts like the ones on his back and arms, the doctor could still see clear red marks from where the whipping instrument had hit Neal.

*"Do you know what was used for the whipping?"*, the doctor asked with a slightly worried expression on his face.

Neal shook his head slowly, and Peter added that he didn't know either, but he could probably find out if it was important.

*"Please do"*, the doctor said and while Peter grabbed his phone to call Diana, he heard the doctor asking Neal more questions about pain, what had happened during the whipping, how the pain had felt, if he'd been able to walk afterward and so on.

The phone call with Diana only lasted a couple of minutes. The agents on the base had found the room in which Neal had been held. The strangulation had probably been caused by a strap, maybe accidentally, and the whipping instrument was most likely a chord that they'd found in a medical bag that a medical staff had been carrying at the time he'd been arrested.

Peter right away relayed the information to the doctor who visibly relaxed and explained.

*"Good. A whipping with an inflexible instrument can cause permanent damage, but this information combined with Mr. Caffrey..."*

*"Neal, please call me Neal"*, Neal interrupted in a whisper and with eyes drooping.

The doctor nodded and continued:

*"Okay... With Neal telling me that he has been on his feet afterward - though more carried than walking - and the level of pain then and now, tells me that there's nothing to worry about. Neal might be feeling a stinging sensation for a couple of days, but everything will be okay."*

Peter breathed a sigh of relief.

*"Now, let's get you in a room, so you can finally get some real sleep. You look like you could sleep for days"*, the doctor said with a smile and a wink at Neal.

Neal barely registered. He was exhausted and within minutes he was sound asleep.

---

When Mozzie woke up the next morning, the first thing he did was to send a text to Peter asking him for an update on Neal and asking - no, commanding - that Peter get Neal to call him.

Mozzie waited for a reply, but when nothing had happened after half an hour, he grabbed the phone and called the Suit.

It was a gruff voice that replied - a voice of someone who had clearly been asleep, but Mozzie didn't care.

*“Suit! Rise and shine and put Neal on the phone - I expect you to still be with him!”*

“Mozzie”, Peter sounded slightly more awake, just slightly, but he kept his voice low.

*“Neal is sleeping”, he explained, “and so was I as a matter of fact, though a recliner isn't my preferred bed, and yes I am - of course - with him.”*

*“So, how is he doing, Suit? What did the doctors say?”*

Peter decided that he might as well give Mozzie a proper update, so he stood up and left Neal's room as silently as possible. He told Mozzie pretty much everything that had happened last night, and what the doctor had said, and before they finished the call, he promised that Neal would call Mozzie later - if his voice allowed him to do so.

Mozzie accepted that and finished off the conversation with an unexpected comment.

*“Thank you, Peter!”*, Mozzie simply said right before he disconnected.

Peter looked at his phone for a second, wondering what had happened to “the Suit”. Mozzie rarely - if he had ever - called him Peter. He smiled. These couple of days must have been harder on Mozzie than Peter thought, and obviously Neal meant a lot to his friend. The little guy had been worried, and Peter figured that those 2 words and his real name were probably the closest thing Mozzie would ever come to showing his appreciations to Peter.

---

After having slept for 8 hours, being awake long enough to eat a little breakfast, swallow some painkillers, visit the restroom (with a little help from a nurse, even though Neal tried to convince both Peter and the nurse that he would be perfectly fine on his own), and then sleep for another 4 hours, Neal finally felt like he was on the mend.

His headache had subsided, his vision was completely back to normal, and except from feeling incredibly sore whenever he moved - minor detail, right? - and once in a while experiencing that stinging sensation that the doctor had talked about, Neal felt better than he had in what seemed like ages.

Peter had been there when he woke up the first time, sleeping in the recliner. Neal

hadn't wanted to wake him up, but somehow Peter must have sensed that Neal was observing him, because he woke up shortly after, looking far from rested.

When Neal had eaten his breakfast and started feeling tired again, he had convinced Peter to leave.

*“Go take a shower, Peter. Meet with the team. Whatever you need. I'll be right here, sleeping, and doing fine without you watching me every second - or snoring so loud that I can't sleep anyway.”*

At first Peter had told Neal off, but when the nurse ended up siding with Neal, Peter relented and left him alone in the care of the medical staff. Neal had gone back to sleep pretty much right away. It hadn't been the most peaceful sleep, now that he thought about it. He'd been dreaming about Rachel and his so-called father, but Neal was determined not to let them bother him anymore, and so he forced himself to let go of the dreams.

He kind of wanted to call Mozzie, but he also felt like he should spare his voice as much as possible. It still hadn't been good in the morning - well... around noon was more like it by the time he had woken up. The nurse had said that it was impossible to judge, because he'd been sleeping for so long.

Neal grabbed the remote and turned on the TV. He had been told that neither watching TV nor reading would be the best treatment for his concussion, but he figured that he could still listen, and so he browsed through the channels until he found a documentary on Discovery Channel about Dutch painters.

Neal closed his eyes and listened to the TV for a while, willing the documentary to draw his thoughts in the direction of Dutch art and painters instead of the previous days' events.

It wasn't easy...

---

When Peter left the medical center, he took a cab and headed straight to the temporary head quarter. However, as soon as he arrived, Diana and Jones had ganged up on him and herded him off to a room with a couch to get some sleep. They had everything under control for the moment. Yes, they would wake him up if needed. No, he shouldn't just talk to anyone first. Yes, they still had agents and local police force at the base, and no, he didn't have to sign anything first.

Peter sat down on the couch, and after a short phone call to El - who apparently was on the same side as Jones and Diana - he kicked off his shoes, shrugged out of his jacket and laid down to rest just for a bit. However, before he knew of it, he slept like a baby.

---

Early in the evening Peter was back at the hospital to see Neal, who fortunately seemed to do a lot better already. He had stopped by the nurse's desk to ask for an update on Neal's health, but he had only been told that the doctor would come by, probably within an hour, and so they would soon know more. Until then he was advised to avoid making Neal talk too much.



Neal had been eating dinner when Peter entered the room. Or to be exact... Dinner had been served, but Neal seemed like he had already decided to let the food be, even though he hadn't eaten much.

Neal smiled when he saw that it was Peter entering, and he opened his mouth to say something, but Peter interrupted him right away:

*"I know you're supposed to rest your voice, so just keep quiet!"*

Peter pointed at the food:

*"Not feeling hungry?"*

Neal tilted his head and frowned a little.

*"Not really",* he said.

*"You could've answered with a shake of your head and not your voice",* Peter commented, trying to look stern, yet knowing that keeping Neal 100% quiet would be a battle lost.

*"Can I borrow your phone?",* Neal asked after Peter sat down.

*"Asks the guy who is supposed to spare his voice!",* Peter said, but still he pulled out his phone, handing it to Neal.

*"Just make it short - and let Mozzie do most of the talking",* Peter said with a resigned expression.

Neal did let Mozzie do the talking. He couldn't have done much else even if he wanted to. First of all, because Mozzie was too eager to tell Neal all about what had happened after Neal was taken from the house, but also because he wanted to tell Neal all the details about the take down that he had received through the grapevine, and finally because Mozzie knew well enough that Neal shouldn't be talking much.

It was a little strange knowing that Neal was in one hospital and Mozzie in another, considering that both of them usually avoided these places. Many a minor injury caused during a heist had been taken care of in alternative ways. Not that Peter needed to know that, Neal thought, while glancing briefly at his partner who was standing with his back to Neal looking out the window - probably trying to give Neal a little privacy while on the phone.

---

It didn't take long before Dr. Catalano stopped by to see Neal. He seemed pleased about Neal's progress. He checked his pupils, his blood pressure, his pulse, he listened to his breathing, and everything appeared to be okay. He asked about any pain in Neal's wrists, if the ointment for the welts were helping, and how much Neal had been bothered by the aftereffects of the foot whipping.

All in all, the doctor was satisfied, so Neal eagerly asked if that meant he was free to go.

*“Not quite yet, Neal - sorry”*, the doctor answered, and Neal's mood instantly fell several degrees.

*“Why not?”*, Neal asked, crossing his arms, wincing - a gesture Peter immediately recognized as the beginning of a long-time pouting, but also a sign that Neal still felt sore.

*“I've scheduled a follow-up examination of your throat for tomorrow...”*, Dr. Catalano explained.

*“But I'm fine”*, Neal protested.

Peter giggled inside. If Neal's voice had been back to normal that would have been a whine - now he sounded more like a teenager whose voice was in transition.

*“Does that voice belong to a throat that is fine?”*, the doctor simply asked.

Neal sighed. He'd been through hell for almost 2 days, and then - what? - 10-15 seconds of almost being strangled in a stupid nylon strap would be the reason he was stuck in a hospital.

*“Look...”*, the doctor continued, *“... strangulation is something that needs to be taken seriously. Even if it doesn't look that way. Even if you hadn't had any marks on your neck, it could be serious, and swelling in your throat can appear several days later. I want to make sure there are no signs of any damage, before I release you. At the first examination your vocal chords seemed “distressed”, so to speak, but you do sound better already, so I expect that by tomorrow they will be just fine. However, as I said... I want to be sure, before I let you go.”*

Neal sat up more and reached out for his glass of water on the table next to the bed, but again he couldn't completely hide the wince that was caused by the movement.

Dr. Catalano added:

*“Besides... You're clearly still in pain, and you will feel more comfortable letting the nurses take care of you at least for one more day.”*

*“At least??”*, Neal's eyebrows shot up.

*“Just get some rest, Neal, and we'll reassess your health tomorrow, okay?”*, the doctor smiled calmly.

Neal just grumbled. He had expected to get out of this place at least by tomorrow morning. He really wanted to go home. He really wanted to stay in his own bed. And he really wanted to be alone and not having people prod and poke at him anymore.

Peter shook hands with Dr. Catalano before returning to face Neal. As soon as the door closed behind the doctor, Peter shook his head, laughing a bit.

*“You sounded like a grumpy teenager.”*

Neal didn't find that funny, and he kind of wanted to explain to Peter, why he just wanted to go home, but at the same time he didn't want to give Peter the pleasure of another uncontrolled sound coming out of his mouth, so instead Neal just kept quiet.

They sat in silence for a couple of minutes, before Neal decided to try and get more comfortable under the covers. He turned his back to Peter and settled down, stiffly.

*"Are you okay?"*, Peter asked him.

Neal sighed, and when he hadn't responded after maybe 5-10 seconds, Peter figured that Neal had decided to pout, and he had almost accepted that he wouldn't get an answer, when he heard Neal's low voice:

*"Yeah... No... not really..."*

Peter was honestly surprised and almost dropped his jaw. Neal admitting that he wasn't "fine"?? Now, there's a first!

Peter leaned forward in the chair and put his hand on Neal's shoulder.

*"You wanna talk?"*

Neal made a half-choked laugh - did he wanna talk? Hell yes, he wanted to be able to just talk, and talk like he usually did. With his own, perfectly sounding voice that didn't make Peter laugh, but could get him anything he wanted, when he wanted it.

Peter realized too late what he'd said.

*"You know what I mean... Come on, Neal. I'm sorry about that. Just... talk to me"*, Peter almost begged.

With his back still turned to Peter, Neal started talking, and he told Peter about what had happened, what his father had said and done, how Rachel had tried to "teach" him how to love and honor her. Peter didn't tell him to spare his voice, he didn't make fun of him when his voice broke - but he did swallow a lump or two the time, Peter knew that it wasn't because of the strangulation that Neal's voice failed him.

Peter sensed the hatred in Neal's voice when he talked about James Bennett - he never called him his father. He also sensed the frustrations in Neal and the hurt in his voice when he talked about Rachel (sometimes he called her Rebecca, and that's when his voice softened a bit).

Peter only asked very few questions along the way, simply because he didn't want to risk that Neal shut down on him and stopped talking. But when Neal finally said:

*"My entire family is fucked up, Peter. It always has been, and it always will be - and if I have my own family one day, it probably will be just as fucked up."*

Peter couldn't hold back:

*"Your entire family?? Does that include El and me? You think we're fucked up, too?"*

Peter could see Neal stiffen.

*“You’re not my family”,* he finally whispered.

Peter felt something grip at his heart. Then he stood up and went to the other side of the bed to face Neal who was staring into nothing, obviously lost in thought.

*“Neal... Please look at me”,* he said.

Peter waited a few seconds, but when Neal didn't react, Peter perched on the edge of the bed and put his hand on Neal's right arm.

*“Neal....”,* Peter said once again.

Neal finally listened to Peter and turned his head to look up at the man sitting next to him. The man he had the deepest respect for, the man he had silently prayed for to come rescuing him, the one man he had come to trust.

*“Family isn't defined by blood”,* Peter said and shook his head.

Neal looked down again.

*“Your family is the people who will always be there for you. I will always be there for you! Trust me!”*

Neal seemed to be lost in thought again, but then he put his left hand on top of Peter's that was still resting on his arm. He looked Peter in the eyes and smiled - the most honest smile Peter had ever seen from the great Neal Caffrey.

*“I trust you!”*

---

## EPILOGUE

Neal and Mozzie were both relaxing on the rooftop terrace of June's mansion - each savoring a glass of... water!?! in their hands. Much to Mozzie's disappointment Neal had said no - and meant it - on the wine. Mozzie was still on heavy duty painkillers, and Neal himself wasn't completely off his either, though he was down to only taking something when his sore muscles ached and the remains of his concussion bothered him too much for him to even think clearly. It happened once in a while, but it would be a matter of days, he figured, before it would be over.

It had been a week since their ordeal begun, and they'd been back in New York for a couple of days. To Neal, though, it felt like everything had happened ages ago. He was already settling back into the old routine.

A knocking on the door disturbed their peaceful afternoon.

*“Neal?”*

It was Peter, letting himself in as he had done every day since they came back. Neal

turned his head and winced a bit - okay, that movement was still off limits, but Peter didn't need to know that.

*"Out here!"*, he called towards to the apartment in the most casual voice he could muster.

A few seconds later Peter stepped out on the terrace, and behind him followed a smiling Elizabeth with a basket full of something that Neal quickly interpreted as homemade goodies.

She sat the basket down on the table and started dishing out some of the delicious food she'd brought along, while Peter pulled a chair out and faced Neal and Mozzie. Peter frowned when he saw their glasses.

*"What?"*, Mozzie asked. *"Do I have a stick growing out of my ear or something?"*

Peter chuckled in response.

*"You're drinking water!"*, he stated and continued.

*"You're actually staying away from the wine, following doctor's orders? I'm impressed!"*, Peter admitted with a smile on his face.

Mozzie kept quiet, unwilling to give Peter the satisfaction of being right, and admitting that he was drinking something as ordinary as water.

They all chatted about this and that and everything in between while enjoying Elizabeth's cooking, but finally Peter realized he had to bring up the subject of last week's experiences.

*"So..."*, he started. *"I've heard from the prosecutor's office."*

Neal and Mozzie both perked up.

*"And?"*, Neal asked.

*"Well"*, Peter continued. *"I'm happy to say that all parties involved in your kidnapping, and what followed during those two days, have been charged. Colonel Turner, your father"...*

*"Don't call him that!"*, Neal interrupted in a stern voice.

*"Sorry"*, Peter quickly replied, before he continued.

*"James Bennet and Rachel are facing really long sentences, maybe even life. But..."*

*"But what, Suit?"*, Mozzie asked curiously, but Neal pretty much knew what was coming.

*"But they want both of you to take the stand"*, Peter finished.

He looked from Neal to Mozzie and back again. Neal was staring intently at his water glass, and Mozzie was shaking his head slowly.

*“No... No-no-no”, Mozzie begun. “We’re not going in there. They’ll brainwash...”*

*“Mozzie!”*, Neal interrupted.

It seemed like that was what he was doing most during this conversation.

*“Don’t...”*, Neal said and held up his hand to signal Mozzie to keep quiet.

*“I’m ready!”*, he said and looked directly at Peter.

*“Look, I understand if you don’t ever want to see any of them again, Neal, but I really...”*, Peter clearly hadn’t heard Neal’s response.

*“I’m ready, Peter! I’ll do it - just name the time and the place, and I’ll be there!”*, Neal said.

*“You’re sure?”*, Mozzie asked doubting his own ears.

*“Yeah... Yeah, I’m sure”*, Neal nodded.

*“I want closure. And the best way to get that is to face those sick assholes - pardon my French”*, Neal hurriedly added and looked apologetic at Elizabeth.

*“Apology accepted”*, Peter said, waving Neal’s cursing away with a gesture of his hands while silently communicating with his wife. Elizabeth just shrugged. Neal clearly had something he needed to finish.

The rest of the evening was joyful. June joined them at one point, and they even convinced her that they should listen to the recording she made (with professional help and managing from Mozzie, he argued) for the case against the owners of The Cotton Club. They laughed at the memories of Diana acting as cigar girl, and Neal fell quiet when he thought of the key from Ellen’s medallion which had been the reason Mozzie had driven him around town in his cab at the time. The key that had set most of this whole mess ashore.

They had enjoyed each others’ company for hours - for the first time since Mozzie and Neal had been released from the hospitals.

---

When everyone had left Neal’s apartment that night, he was lying on his bed ready to go to sleep. His mind was going over the conversation with Peter, what the prosecutor would expect, how the trials would go, and how he would feel when facing the man who was half the reason that Neal was even walking this earth.

He sighed deeply.

If he had known as a kid how much running away would have meant for his life, Neal was pretty sure he would’ve run away much sooner. He shook his head. That was in the past. His thoughts moved on...

NEVER! Never ever would he let anyone else decide who he could or should love.

Nevermore would he consider James Bennet his father.  
And no-one... No-one in the entire universe could ever convince Neal Caffrey that family was defined by blood.

He'd told himself before that family aren't people who show up on your doorstep after 30 years. Well... Then it was mostly a way to comfort himself, to avoid getting hurt once again. Neal snickered. See how much good that did him!

But now he knew. He knew that family are the ones that are there when you need them. And he had his family right here. They had all been with him tonight, making him laugh, making him feel better when he became melancholic. Those were the people he loved. They were the people he trusted - and always would.

Neal smiled and rolled over on his side.

He didn't need to run anymore. He trusted Peter to know that he wouldn't run. Because he had his family here.

June, Peter, Elizabeth, Mozzie... And of course his distant cousins, Diana and Jones. Neal giggled to himself.

His family.

Always!