

Summary: Peter realizes that his comment about Neal being a criminal and his decision to bring a new handler has a more devastating effect than he could expect. Spoilers for Season 5.

Warnings: Hurt, Angst, Violence, Abuse of Authority

Disclaimer: I do not own White Collar

“Bring him home”

By PadyandMoony

“Bring him home,” he heard and looked up from the game he was pretending to watch. He had been doing a lot of that lately, pretending to pay attention to boring meetings, pretending to enjoy a lunch, pretending a huge part of his life hadn’t just disappeared because of him.

“Bring him home,” El said again walking towards the couch and sitting next to him. She took the control from his hand and turned off the TV. “I took them for granted,” she gave him a tearful smile. “Mozzie was right. I always expected both of them to land on their feet. I didn’t worry about them. He said I didn’t care but that’s not right – I did – I just took them for granted, that they’d figure something out. And I knew there would be a scheme or a con but I convinced myself that if I didn’t know the details, I wasn’t in the wrong. He was right. I was being a humongous hypocrite. But he was also wrong – I didn’t do that because I didn’t love them, I didn’t love Neal. I do, I do. So much, but I took him for granted and I hurt him.”

And he had hurt Neal too. So much. Mozzie had been right and furious. He had heard so many of Mozzie’s rants, blaming him, saying Neal had Stockholm Syndrome. But he had never seen him truly angry. Not until that day in the hospital. Not until Mozzie had thrown the comment with so much venom in his voice.

“For all the faults I attributed to you Agent Burke,” and Peter had noticed the lack of his nickname *Suit* and his title being used to slap him in the face and found that it was a very effective slap, “I never thought I’d put you and your wife in the same category as Kate, as

James. But I guess I was wrong. You are just like them. You let Neal think you cared and you took full advantage of the fact that he loved you and that Neal does anything for the people he loves. For his family. But he was never your family, was he? Agent, Mrs. *Burke*. You two never cared for him. You've both used him, led him on, but at the end of the day you two only care about the two of you."

After spending six weeks in AdSeg, risking life in prison or at best his career, Peter never thought he'd say this about another day. But that day, that day was the worst of his life. The day the new handler he had handpicked for Neal because he would keep his perspective almost killed him. The day he found out that wasn't the worst he'd done.

Still getting adjusted to being the ASAC, Peter was yearning to be back in the field and when Jones had raised doubts about an operation Peter decided to surprise the team and join them in the van when they were already rolling. When he arrived there and was appraised of the details of the bust he was furious.

"What the hell were you thinking sending Neal there alone? These people have ties to the mob. They are violent. You can't send him there without backup!"

"I offered-" Jones started but was cut by Agent Smith, Neal's new handler.

"Caffrey can handle himself. Sending someone with him was sure to be suspicious not to mention the fact that I'm not about to risk the life of an agent if I don't have to."

"But you'll risk Neal's?" Peter asked furiously and glared at the man and then at Jones who was listening intently to the radio feed of the meet taking place between the very violent mobsters and his unarmed, untrained CI.

"He is a *criminal*. His life isn't as valuable as an agent's," the man said simply and Peter's blood ran cold. "He is a tool to be used so we don't have to risk our agents." Peter realized then that

he had chosen someone with too much perspective. But before he could say anything Jones cursed.

“We need to get in there. This is going south.”

“Have they made the trade?” Smith asked.

“No, but they are suspicious, they-“

“Then we wait.”

“Neal needs backup now!” Jones shouted.

“I’m his handler. This my decision and we say we wait Agent Jones. Bad enough you ran to daddy,” Smith said jerking his head towards Peter.

“You may be Neal’s handler but I am your boss,” Peter took over. “And if Jones believe there is a risk we are going in. Give the order Jones. You’re sitting this one out Smith,” he said taking his gun out and heading towards the meeting point with the other agents as Smith fumed. But they were too late. Jones was right. Moretti was a paranoid bastard and he shot Neal before they could get there.

Peter should have thanked Jones later, because he took point in taking the mobsters out. Peter could only run to Neal. Try to stop the bleeding. Curse the paramedics slowness and pray.

He did remember yelling at Smith that he was suspended until further notice and he was entertaining thoughts of ripping him a new one before transferring him when the doctor came to talk to him.

He had come to explain that Neal was going into surgery but that wasn’t all. He needed to call the police.

“He was shot in an operation gone wrong. We already have the man who shot him,” he answered.

“That’s not why I need to bring the police sir. I am concerned about his other injuries.”

“What other injuries?” Peter had asked not comprehending and the doctor handed him a tablet. Before taking Neal to surgery they had documented the injuries, and Peter looked in horror at a picture of Neal’s back full of belt marks and at one of his wrists which had cut marks from too tight cuffs. He heard a sharp intake of breath behind and saw Jones, stone faced staring at the picture. He was angry, but he wasn’t shocked and Peter turned on him.

“Clinton?” he asked. Jones had brought up the subject a few times.

“Peter, we can handle Neal. I don’t think Smith really understands how best to deal with him.”

“That’s exactly why I brought him in. He isn’t emotionally involved. He will not forget Neal is a criminal.”

“I know Peter, but maybe he is exaggerating.”

“No he isn’t.”

“Clinton?” he repeated. “Did you know about this?”

He looked at Peter than at the doctor. “No, not about this. I would have lodged a formal complaint. But I told you. Smith, he treated Neal - I don’t even know what name to give to how he acted. He wouldn’t let Neal go out to lunch. He had Neal in before everyone and after hours. Sometimes for 15, 16 hours days. Diana started bringing Neal food. Neal didn’t say anything. I’m ashamed to say that I didn’t notice at first. Diana mentioned it to me. Because, because since finding out she was pregnant without a partner Neal has been helping her. He offered to be her Lamaze partner, and he painted the nursery and all that and Diana

mentioned that since Smith arrived Neal hasn't been able to attend any of the Lamaze classes."

Peter hadn't known that. That Neal was helping Diana or that he wasn't leaving the office. He had decided to step back. Not interfere in the new relationship. Only now did he realize he had gone weeks without even talking to Neal. He was so busy with his new role, with meetings and still trying to be home in time for El, who was still shaken up about the whole prison ordeal that he hadn't spared a moment to think of Neal. He had given him to his new handler and forgotten about him and look what happened.

"And the way Smith orders him around- Peter, I tried bringing that up with you but-"

"I dismissed you. And Diana," Peter nodded. He turned towards the doctor. "Call NYPD. We are going to have our own investigation but - I want to make sure he pays."

Neal's surgery had taken hours. He had called El and had asked her to call Mozzie.

"I'll try hon, but I haven't heard from him since you were released. He hasn't returned any of my calls."

That wasn't like Mozzie, and taking this abuse - that wasn't like Neal. Why hadn't Neal said something?

Mozzie may not have been answering El's calls but he was hearing the messages and he showed up about halfway through Neal's six-hour surgery. Peter and El had gotten up as soon as he spotted Mozzie and knowing he needed to talk to Mozzie without prying eyes, he led him away from the group of White Collar FBI agents that had gathered to wait for news. Apparently Smith was the only one who didn't like Neal at the office and he was also universally disliked, as sitting there with El by his side, Peter had spent the better part of the last three hours listening to hushed accusations between the agents. Things each one of them had seen him do

to Neal but that they had felt that since Jones and Diana hadn't been heard, they probably wouldn't either.

"He cuffed Neal to the car when we went to interrogate a witness. And when I tried to protest, Neal just said that was okay. Agent Smith had the right. How could he?" Blake had whispered to a colleague.

Peter was kicking himself.

El had followed him and at the time, Peter had thought that was better. El had a rapport with Mozzie, he'd be more open to her. Except he wasn't counting on the fact that Mozzie was rightfully pissed at both of them.

Once they were alone Peter had started on Mozzie, on why neither he nor Neal had brought any of this up. At first Mozzie had listened to Peter his face impassive but Peter should have realized his face wasn't impassive. His face was of quiet fury.

"Why don't you get off your high horse Burke?" he shot once Peter had demanded an answer.

"You know very well why he didn't feel like he could come to you about that or Hagen."

"No, I don't, wait Hagen?"

"Oh, save your lies for someone who believes them," Mozzie snapped. "We both know you're not that stupid," he walked menacingly forward and for someone who was considerably shorter than Peter, Peter was surprised to notice he was intimidated. "First your wife, as she's done several times before, asks Neal to do anything to get you out and save your job. That after accusing Neal of only being interested on proving your innocence only because of his deal."

"No Mozzie, I didn't mean-"

But Mozzie acted as if she hadn't interrupted him not even looking at her, "Forget the fact that the Section Chief had already assured Neal that regardless of what happened to you they weren't going to recant his deal because he was too valuable an asset. Assigning him to Jones while you were incarcerated. But no, she accused him anyway and then threw right after that, "do whatever you have to"."

"And he looked for James-

"Do you see anyone else here Burke?" Mozzie sneered. "Just us. No audience. You know as well as I do that maybe if Neal had had the time of your trial to look for James he may have found him. But with one day left after six weeks of no clue. And that James would actually make that call! I don't believe for a second that you think that was actually James or that you forgot a little nifty piece of equipment we used to imitate Larssen's voice. No, you know that wasn't James," he poked a finger on Peter's chest. "You know that that tape wouldn't hold to closer scrutiny. You know Neal had to have done something. He's deal with the devil to get you out. You just conveniently *pretended* to believe James called. And deep down Neal knows that too."

"Hagen?"

"Hagen had access to the prosecutor."

"The coins, were payment," Peter concluded and Mozzie just stared at him with crossed arms, as if daring him to say he was going to arrest Neal for the coins. But Peter didn't understand, he knew Neal had more money than what the coins – Hagen was a problem. Of course. Hagen set Neal up, he probably had video and was blackmailing Neal. And Neal didn't feel he could come to Peter. Not after Peter reminded him he was a criminal, and changed his anklet.

"What does Hagen-

“I already took care of that. I have *real* friends,” Mozzie had spat and both Peter and El flinched. Peter had later found out that apparently Hagen had forgot to calculate the possibility of a virus erasing all his copies of that video. Making everything his word against Neal’s. Sally of course. But Peter decided not to pursue any of that. He owed that to Neal. After a few more choice words Mozzie stalked out and joined June far away from the FBI agents. Peter stood there just staring ahead not even being able to console El’s choked, “Peter.”

When the doctor came and told them all Neal’s surgery had been a success Peter’s relief was short lived as June politely stopped him from going to Neal’s room.

“I believe you are not Neal’s handler anymore Agent Burke,” she hadn’t called him Agent Burke since that first day on her terrace. She had always called him Peter. “I’m sure you have more important things to deal with.”

So he had, the first thing was deal with Smith who had been taken to interrogation by Jones and Blake after being arrested. Peter made sure they took the long way through the office and everyone saw the perp walk. The worst was Smith thinking he was going to get away with everything. He didn’t even deny he had assaulted Neal and had the gall to say he did so on Peter’s orders.

“I was doing what I was told to do Burke. He is a criminal that needed to be kept in line. I felt the good old belt was quite a nice way to do that. If he didn’t agree he could have always gone back to prison.”

Peter didn’t understand how he could have gone so wrong with this agent. He had come so highly recommended. He had a good track record and everyone said he would not have been swayed by Neal’s silver tongue. And Peter realized that was what sold Smith to him. He

wanted someone who wouldn't coddle Neal and ended up getting a bigot who didn't think Neal was worth the effort.

Peter had fired him and then handed him over to NYPD before he did something that would jeopardize the case against Smith.

Neal had been unconscious for three days. And Peter had been relegated to getting news from nurses and doctors as every time he even tried to get anywhere near Neal's room Mozzie or June were standing guard.

Since he wasn't allowed anywhere near he tried to get his mind occupied with figuring out how to make sure Neal wasn't going to get caught for the coins. He couldn't let Neal be sent back and get even more time for something he only did to save Peter. He was coming up with nothing short of burying the case, and that could always come back to bite him in the ass, when Bancroft walked into his office with the answer.

"I don't understand sir."

"Mr. Caffrey has done very good work and he was instrumental on taking down the corrupt senator that landed you your promotion so we have talked to the Corrections Board because we feel, and they agree, he deserves a reduction of his sentence."

"He'll have another commutation hearing?"

"No," Bancroft looked uncomfortable. "Everything has already been set up. Mr. Caffrey is a free man. And, as a token of our appreciation for everything he has done for the Bureau we have also extended immunity to anything he might have done to this date."

"Everything – what," Peter was astounded but as he examined the papers he saw all there. Neal was a free man and even if they did find out about the coins they were covered by immunity.

“To avoid a repeat of the whole Mentor fiasco we made sure to have the judge’s decision on video too,” Bancroft indicated the DVD on the folder. Yeah, so they don’t accuse him of forgery again. Peter couldn’t believe his luck until Bancroft added.

“And you’ll be happy to know the DA is prosecuting Smith for the assault.”

Peter smiled sardonically, “This is payoff, so Neal won’t sue the Bureau.”

“This situation Peter- all of this looks really bad. You get a promotion for taking down Pratt and Neal gets an Agent who physically abuses him. Deliberately puts him in the line of fire.”

Yeah, a law suit wouldn’t just get Neal a huge settlement but would make the Bureau, who was already looking bad after Calloway was found to have been in Pratt’s pocket bad. He knew this was payoff but he couldn’t help but be glad that at least Neal wouldn’t have to worry about Hagen and the coins.

“I’ll make sure Neal and his lawyer get this.”

But if he thought the freedom papers would be well received and fix everything he was wrong. When Peter received the notice from the doctor about Neal being up and alert he had rushed to the hospital. Apparently the doctor was a little bit too optimistic on the alert part. Neal was still pretty stoned for the next two days but once he was really alert Peter gave him the good news on one of the few moments he managed to slip in when Mozzie had to leave the room.

Neal had nodded and shrewdly declared, “I guess I should be happy for the payoff. Don’t worry. I’m not suing.”

“Neal, you should have told-“

“I’m a criminal remember Peter,” he cut Peter off and Peter flinched at having his words thrown back at him. Peter could see Neal’s eye were watering but Neal was doing his best to

put up a stony face. "But now I am a free criminal, and you don't have to worry. I'm not going to do anything illegal, so do me a favor and don't try to find me."

"Neal, you've just been shot, this is a huge change. You can't be thinking of leaving--"

"I love you and El," Neal said suddenly looking straight into Peter's eyes. "And for a long time I believed you two loved me too. And I should have seen the signs, but I didn't. I guess I am really bad at that. I didn't with Kate or James. And I didn't with the two of you. So I need to go away. Because as long as I am here I will do anything to make sure the two of you are all right and when you call I will answer. But even a criminal such as myself deserves better than that. I deserve to find people who will love me back. So, *Agent Burke*, please let me go." And there was so much raw pain in Neal's pleading that Peter couldn't do anything but nod and leave. He had hoped Neal would change his mind. That he would have time to change Neal's mind. Neal had just been shot. He was going to need to recover but when he and El had gone to June's mansion a couple of days after he learned Neal was released from the hospital, because El had reasoned, "He's had time to cool off. But we need to show him we care," they had a nasty surprise.

"Neal isn't here Agent Burke," the maid had said. "Mrs. Ellington and Mr. Mozzie arranged for a medical transport and they have left the country. I am not at liberty to say to where."

And that had been almost a month ago and now El was begging him to bring Neal back. He could have checked airlines. A medical transport wouldn't be hard to find, but he hadn't. He had felt that after his poor repayment for everything Neal had done for him the least he could do was respect his wishes. But El was right. Neal was family and they couldn't get his forgiveness if they weren't near him. They would need to work a lot for his forgiveness but he was worth it.

He picked up his phone and dialed, "Diana, I'm taking a vacation, but first, I need some flight information."

The end

A/N: Okay. I needed to do this. The premiere left me so completely depressed and so angry at both Peter and El that I just needed them to take that step. To realize they screwed up and have to fix things. I leave the actual fixing to your imagination or maybe one day I'll be inspired. But right now I just needed this angst off my chest.

I know exaggerated a bit (lot) and taken a lot of creative license with the handler and the pardon and all but I just needed for something to bring the fact that Peter broke Neal's heart to his attention effectively and I could just see that a big whumpage with something that had been a direct result from his little perspective talk to Neal and then lose him without being entitled to bringing him back because of his badge would bring that home like nothing else could. And I can also see Mozzie and all his paranoia not buying that Peter really believes that James confessed, regardless of if he does or not.

Also, I mean no offense to the FBI. I don't believe Agent Smith's actions reflect the FBI but I needed a baddie.

I hope you enjoyed!