

Summary: After realizing their mistake, Peter and El set out to fix what they broke. Spoilers for Season 5. This is the sequel to "Bring him home" and can't be understood alone.

Warnings: Hurt, Angst, Mentions of Violence and Abuse of Authority

Disclaimer: I do not own White Collar

"Bringing him home"

By PadyandMoony

Peter picked up the suitcase and placed it in the cart where El was waiting nervously. They were in France.

"France, did she go to France?"

Peter wondered if there was a story there between Kate and Neal or if the destination had been chosen for other reasons. He also wondered if Neal was really in France. The information was uncomfortably easy to obtain. Diana had pulled flight information for the days between Neal's discharge and when he and El had gone to June's and she had come up with a private flight from a medical transportation company that flew straight from New York to Paris with passengers June Ellington, Dante Haversham and Neal Caffrey. French customs confirmed they entered the country. But Peter couldn't see Mozzie of all people doing something so...straight forward, in the open. No aliases, no change of routes to lose a tail.

"Neal was injured hon. He couldn't have travelled in their usual manner. And besides, he is a free man now, he doesn't need to travel under an alias."

Yes, he was a free man. Peter couldn't just drag him home and once he found them he really didn't know how to bring him home. How to make him forgive Peter. He had tried to make up several speeches on the plane but nothing seemed good enough. Nothing seemed to convey how much he wished he could just turn back time. How he could explain to Neal that he had just been trying to protect him not wash his hands of him, as he had heard whispered in hush

tones at the office. How could he explain, that yes, he had been that stupid. He had believed James had made the call. Now that he knew everything, he couldn't understand himself how he hadn't realized what Neal had done the second he heard that recording. Neal had visited him the day before saying they didn't have a clue as to where James was. Neal didn't lie to him. To think Neal would have found him in less than a day. A man who had spent 30 years off the grid. Even Neal wasn't that good.

But no, he knew why he fooled himself. He had seen the pain in Neal's eyes when he tried taking the blame for James. He had seen James hadn't just screwed Peter. He had broken Neal's heart. He had used him to get the evidence box and then he had disappointed Neal all over again. Abandoned him again. And Peter had hoped that the man had done something to repair what he had broken. But he should have known better. The whole speech had Neal written all over it not James. The words were things said between Peter and Neal. Face Justice. Do the right thing. How many times hadn't he said those things to Neal?

"Actions have consequences and you need to take responsibility for those consequences."

Now it was Peter's turn to face the consequences.

"Where to?" El asked bringing him out of his musings.

"I think we should check in at the hotel and then check out the address they provided when they entered the country."

"You think they gave the real address?" El asked hopefully.

Peter sighed, "I don't know," he shook his head. "That doesn't sound like Neal and most certainly not like Mozzie. But you're right, they are not hiding, so it's worth a try."

"Maybe, deep down he wants you to find him," El said taking his arm and leaning towards him as they pushed the cart. Peter could only hope.

Xxx

“I thought better of you Peter. I thought you’d respect his wishes,” June said with a disapproving frown from inside the door of the luxurious apartment. Peter and El were still outside where they’d been since ringing the doorbell. They had been lucky. One of the buildings residents was going in when they arrived and they entered with him instead of ringing the intercom. If June’s frown was anything to go by, they wouldn’t have been buzzed in.

“Is he home? I – look June. We gave him time to cool down. But – this – this is so messed up and this is a huge misunderstanding and miscommunication, and I’m not trying to excuse myself. This is all my fault, but I need to fi-“

“He’s family June,” El interrupted. “He’s family and family just doesn’t give up on each other.”

“You’re the ones who seem to have forgotten that Mrs. Burke,” June said in a flat tone and El flinched. Mrs. Burke.

But she ploughed on, “I know. We did.”

Peter snapped his head at her so fast he wondered how his head didn’t snap right off his neck.

“And mostly, this is my fault,” she continued. “Not because I don’t love Neal...and Mozzie, but because – I was scared June. I almost lost Peter. And I know this was not Neal’s fault,” she pressed as June seemed to want to interrupt her. “Rationally I know that. But I couldn’t stop thinking that if Peter hadn’t gotten mixed up with something of Neal’s none of this would have happened. And I *know* that’s stupid thinking. Because this wasn’t just about Neal, and he tried his best to keep Peter out of it even before I asked him and well, Peter being Peter wouldn’t do that. But I was scared and I – Neal is bigger than life and he does crazy things and he comes off on top-“

“That’s not true. If that were true Kate would be alive. He wouldn’t have spent four years in prison and almost three on the anklet, his father wouldn’t-“

“I know,” El interrupted. “But that’s not what one sees. Not without looking deeper. We see Neal with one of his schemes and then him landing on his feet and I got used to thinking of him like that. Like someone who could get away from anything without help. And I was wrong, *sooo* wrong. But I didn’t worry about him, or Mozzie and I just worried about Peter and asked Peter to stay away and that is my fault.”

She took a deep breath and continued, “Mozzie was right. I look back. To those days and I wonder who that person is. Because I can’t believe I could have been that manipulative. And I was. I did ask him to do whatever he had to knowing full well he would. And I was mean. I told him he only cared about himself knowing that wasn’t true because I was angry – and I guess – he was there, you know? James wasn’t there. I couldn’t yell everything I wanted to yell at James and instead I passively aggressively took out my anger on Neal. And I am *soo* sorry you can’t even begin to imagine how much I wished I had acted differently. How much I wish I had told Peter what I thought. When he was wondering why Neal would steal those coins. Because he was right, Neal doesn’t steal without a reason and I knew the reason had to do with whatever he did for Peter. Instead I squashed my thoughts on that and I asked Peter to get away and I hate myself for that. But that doesn’t mean I don’t love him. Just that I was stupid and angry and scared.”

June looked at her with a look that was a mix of sympathy and fear. He could see El had touched her but she wanted to protect Neal. He was about to start his own argument when a man’s hand grabbed the door and opened it further. He got his breath knocked out of him. Neal was standing there. He looked thin and a bit unhealthy but he wasn’t as pale as those days in the hospital. He wasn’t unmoving like in the ambulance. He was standing on his own and not propped up on pillows.

“Why Peter, why do I have to work hard and give up my former ways?” he asked and the question was so out of the blue and not anything to do with what they were talking that Peter was taken aback.

“You know why, you have a good thing going on back home and that is better than prison, than your old life,” he started his usual speech.

“You told me that it doesn’t matter what I do. How well I behave, how much I rehabilitate myself. I’m a criminal,” Peter started shaking his head, “That’s what *you told me* Peter. You turned to me and said that everything I did, all the hard work I put - And I know you think I don’t try but I do, you have no idea how hard I try.”

“I do-,” Peter tried saying but Neal went on.

“That all that was for nothing. Because I’m a criminal and that’s all I’ll ever be.”

And now Peter understood. They were still talking about the same subject. He just was talking about how Peter hurt him, not El.

“No, just while the anklet was on,” he tried to explain. “Neal. I couldn’t forget what you were capable while the anklet was on because-“

“That makes no sense Peter,” Neal interrupted him and Peter could hear the underlying anger and hurt. “If you think I’m a criminal one minute and haven’t changed, the next minute that changes just because the anklet came off? It doesn’t work like that Peter. It doesn’t happen by magic. If at the last second of my sentence all I had done was worth nothing it didn’t miraculously start being worth something the second after the end of my sentence.”

“That’s not what I meant Neal,” he tried desperately to explain. He needed Neal to understand. Peter knew he had changed. Peter believed in him. But there were risks. “What I

meant was that until that anklet came off we couldn't forget that you were at risk of not only going back to prison but getting more time!"

"*You think I don't know that?* I remembered that every second Peter! But that's not what you said Peter! What you said was that I am a *criminal!* In one breath you called me family and in the other one you disavowed me. You washed your hands of me!" Neal was screaming now and Peter had never seen Neal lose control this way without meaning. June tried to put a calming hand on his arm and Peter saw Neal taking a step back and trying to calm himself.

Peter took a deep breath, "I appointed you a new handler because I thought I was allowing you to risk-"

"I'm not talking about Smith. I don't actually think you chose him because you knew what he would do. I still don't believe you could be that person Peter," which meant someone did. Someone was trying to convince Neal that Peter had known. And he couldn't really blame Mozzie for that. He was trying to protect Neal. "That's not the problem Peter. The problem is you think of me as a criminal and nothing more. I love you like family but the reverse isn't true."

"That's not true," Peter said vehemently.

"Your love is conditional Peter. Family's isn't. Mozzie didn't like me working for the Bureau. Never did. He told me enough times he wished I had just bid my time in jail. I'd be safer. I already had contacts, and I knew how prison worked. I managed to keep myself safe for four years there and another four would be hard but not impossible. Not life threatening. I was a model prisoner Peter. There was even a chance I'd get parole after half my sentence."

Peter knew that, if not for the escape, Neal's record was spotless.

“But Kate was worth the risk. Kate was worth knowing that the second I made that deal with you if I went back I’d be dead and hoping to die quickly. And I never for one second forgot that. But she was worth the risk. And Mozzie had my back no matter what. No matter how much I disappointed him by choosing you *over and over again*. And you know why that is Peter? Because that’s family. Family isn’t family just when it’s convenient. Just when they need you to break the law for them and then turn their back on you. And that’s what you and Elizabeth did,” he turned to look at her with so much emotion in his eyes El wanted to turn away but she didn’t. She met his eyes with her own watery ones so he could see how she wished she could change that. “You asked me to do anything to get Peter out knowing what you were asking of me and then you two washed your hands of me. And I will not allow myself to forget that. I will not allow myself to fall for that con again. I will keep my nose clean because I can’t afford to go back to prison but I will not let you in again.”

“I can’t let that happen Neal,” Peter said firmly. He needed to say this and Neal needed to hear this even if he wasn’t ready to forgive them. “Because I know you’re angry, but you know something else about family? Family screws up at times, and family doesn’t give up when a member of the family is hurt and angry. Family keeps coming back until they are forgiven and we will keep coming back Neal. I won’t let you go, and one day, one day you won’t be as angry.”

“I’m not angry, I’m disappointed. You let me down.”

Another prison.

“You let me down Neal.”

“I didn’t let you down.”

Peter couldn't say the same, "I know I have. And you are angry. But one day you won't be and I'll be here," he finished holding Neal's gaze a while longer before taking El's hand and beckoning her away.

Before following her El said simply, "We both will. I'm sorry. I so, so sorry."

Xxx

They didn't kiss and make up immediately like Peter wished. Neal didn't call them and he didn't answer the door when they buzzed. But that didn't stop them. They had staked him out the first day and figured out Neal's routine. He was still recovering. The damage from the bullet had been bad and Neal apparently was still going to physical therapy. He talked to June, who after their speech was a little more open to them, and she said that he was improving. Not as fast as the doctors wished which they attributed to depression, and here she gave Peter a pointed look. But he was a lot better than when he started, when he could barely get out of the wheel chair. He was able to walk to the physical therapy, which was close by.

So, Peter and El, and sometimes only Peter or only El, sat on a bench in front of the apartment building every day. Neal came out, glared at them and started walking without looking at them again. Pretending he wasn't seeing them following him from the other sidewalk. He did the same thing when he came out to find them sitting at the café in front of the physical therapy.

That went on for about two weeks until one day Peter was surprised when half an hour before the physical therapy session was supposed to end the chair in front of him was dragged back and Neal sat on it. He ordered a cup of coffee and didn't say anything other than:

"Everywhere else is full," Peter wisely chose not to comment that he could have sat at the counter.

This routine also continued for a few days. Both with him and El. Not a word was said and the day after this started Peter and El received a visit at their hotel.

“You better not screw this up again,” was the only thing Mozzie said as he narrowed his eyes at them and then walked away.

Finally, on the fifth day. A day only Peter had gone. After drinking his coffee, Neal offered.

“I’ve been approved for field duty again.”

“Excuse me?” Peter dared not to hope.

“The doctor said I could go back to the field. Is there a position?”

“Is there-“

“You’re the boss. I figured you’re the one to ask. I want Diana as my handler.”

“She’s on maternity leave. I got an email yesterday. She is almost due.”

“I know,” Neal said simply. “That’s why my plane leaves today. I promised her I’d be there for her.”

His plane left today. He was going back. He was going home.

“I can handle Jones while she’s off. We get along well. But you don’t mess with Diana.”

“No, you don’t,” Peter said with a smile. “Actually. I’ve been in talks with the bosses. I don’t like deskwork.” And he didn’t, he had hated the few months he had as ASAC. He wanted to blow his head off with the boredom and bureaucracy. “Turns out Hughes doesn’t like retirement either – he’s been covering for me now - but he also doesn’t want to be ASAC full time so they offered for us to share and this way, I’ll still be able to do field work. So, you know. I could be your handler.”

Neal said nothing.

“Just till Diana comes back. Of course.”

“Of course,” Neal said and they both pretended to believe Diana was actually ever going to be Neal’s handler.

They finished their coffees in silence and Peter ran to the hotel to book a flight back and give El the good news.

They weren’t back to how they’d been. Baby steps. But Neal was reaching back and that was a start that let Peter know they were in the right track. That let Peter know that eventually, eventually they’d be okay. They just had to make sure he knew they were there for him and that if they could, they’d do everything different.

The end

A/N: Now that my initial ire towards Peter has abated I was able to make him redeem himself. I hope you enjoyed and I so hope the show goes in a similar route (minus the whole shooting. Poor Neal.) I wanted to post this before the new episode is out so I don’t get influenced by anything there, so I apologize if this feels rushed or there are too many mistakes.