No Flag on the Play

by Garrae

Summary

Beckett overhears Castle telling Demming that there's no flag on the play, which comes on top of an unsuccessful stay at the loft and a case which reopens a less-than-pleasant time in her past. AU of the second half of S2.
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Notes

No archive warnings apply, but there is implied reference to sexual abuse and violence.
“You want to come for a drink?” Demming asks.

“Yeah. Yeah, I’d love to.” Anything, rather than another solo, boring evening staring at her unadorned walls. Lanie’s busy with backed-up bodies, and has been for a week and more; and O’Leary’s just plain busy.

“Great. I’ll see you later.

“Okay, great.” Well. Not precisely great, but certainly pleasant.

Beckett drifts away. At least someone finds her attractive. It’s nice to be wanted, and if Demming wants to go for a drink that’s at least one evening when she isn’t staring at the walls or her desk. She’s not exactly sure she wants anything more, but just undemanding company would be good. On her route, she passes Castle, obviously going hunting for a coffee. That’s just how they are now: crossing routes in passing. He hasn’t really spoken about anything but cases in a month: hardly any flirtation, and that only automatic and unthinking.

Halfway to her desk, she realises that she’s left her notepad in the break room and returns. Before she enters the room, she stops. Demming is now talking to Castle – and it’s about her. She knows she shouldn’t listen: that eavesdroppers never hear good of themselves – but just maybe there’ll be some words from Castle that give her a little hope. Even some idea of what went wrong.

“Castle, can I ask you something?” Demming says. He sounds uncertain. “You and Beckett – is there, uh, something going on?”

She holds her breath, hoping.

“Me and Beckett?” Castle says, sounding astonished that Demming would ask.

“Yeah.”

“No,” Castle says bluntly.

Beckett only just controls her instant, stabbing agony. That’s it? Just – no. She leans on the wall. The next few words are no better.

“Look, man, if I’m offsides” –

“No flag on the play.”

So she’s a football play? Worse, she’s a mannequin to be passed from man to man, without any opinion of her own on the subject? Where does Demming get off checking that she’s single with Castle, when he didn’t ask her? Did he think she’d be going for drinks with him if she were in a relationship? Her searing hurt combines with searing rage.

“Great. Okay. Great.”

At least someone’s happy here. Well, he won’t be for much longer.

She goes to the restroom before either man can move and find her listening, locks herself in a stall, and struggles to deal with what she’s just heard. Not even a hesitation, just no. She should have known. She should have known from when she was forced to stay at the loft, but she hadn’t
wanted to believe it, and up till now Castle had at least still brought coffee and flirted.

Letting her down gently, it seems. He’d have flirted with any pretty woman, and he did. Nothing special about her. Nothing at all. She’s just research.

She stays right where she is for another few moments, blows her nose twice, then repairs her eye make-up and goes back to her desk to bury herself and her fractured heart in the case.

She manages to conceal her feelings for the whole of the rest of the shift. Castle’s already gone, before she’d returned to her desk, which is a relief. Even Beckett’s total emotional control isn’t up to sitting next to someone who really couldn’t care less, when she’d hoped… Well. No point dreaming. It’s not going to happen.

Hard upon that thought, Demming slithers up to her desk.

“Want to come for that drink now?” he asks.

Beckett looks up. No-one else is around. “No.” She doesn’t bother to soften her refusal.

“That’s a bit harsh. You agreed earlier.”

“I’ve changed my mind. I heard you.”

“ Heard me?”

“ Heard you asking Castle if we were involved.”

“Yeah?” There’s a distinct aura of confusion and so what’s the problem?

“Why didn’t you simply ask me? Didn’t my opinion count?”

“Uh?”

“Why didn’t you ask me if I was involved with Castle?”

“Uh? I didn’t want to tread on any toes.”

“I don’t appreciate being passed around like a parcel.”

“It wasn’t like” –

“Or maybe you didn’t think I’d give you a straight answer. Did you think if you asked me you’re so attractive that I’d be up for a little casual cheating?” Her voice is glacial. “Or were you going to offer a threesome?”

“No! That wasn’t” –

“I’m not interested in someone who thinks women don’t have a mind of their own. Or who thinks they can’t be trusted without validation from some other man.” She looks full at him, face cold. “Shame you’re an asshole. You can leave now. Esposito or Ryan will call you if we need anything on the case. We don’t need you in Homicide.”

“But Beckett… Kate” –

“Leave. This isn’t your patch.”
Demming goes, the set of his shoulders indicating that he still doesn’t have a clue how he screwed up.

Beckett looks at the papers on her otherwise tidy desk, looks at the clock, notices without caring that it’s coming up to seven p.m., and buries herself in her work. It’s better than going back to her lonely apartment.

It’s certainly better than thinking about how she now knows that Castle doesn’t care about her. He’d been quite happy that someone else wanted to date her. Didn’t express any interest on his own account. It’s just the same as when she was staying in the loft, and indeed the four weeks or so and one predatory actress since. Well, now she’s sure. Now she knows.

Now she knows what she only suspected, then. She thinks back.

Staying in the loft had been surprisingly, bitterly uncomfortable. The first night, she’d practically had to handcuff herself to her own – no, the guest – bed not to slip downstairs and join him in his: desperate for the comfort and security of his broad frame to keep away the nightmares and the shock; desperate to recover the feeling she’d had when he carried her out of the wreckage and flames.

But then, it had already all begun to go wrong, almost immediately she walked through the door.

Despite issuing the invitation, Castle had been tense from the moment after she was ushered in, when it had become instantly clear that he hadn’t pre-warned his family. To say they were surprised would have been an understatement. Alexis had quite clearly been horrified. It had, later the same day, become apparent that, quite understandably, Alexis didn’t want the loft to be blown up. If she’d merely said that out loud, it might have cleared the air. If, of course, that had been all of it. Beckett wasn’t sure about that, initially, either.

The least she could have done, she’d thought, was offer to help: make dinner, or tidy up. Her help was politely – oh, so politely – turned down. Dad and I have got this, Alexis had simply said, and Castle didn’t query it: simply told her she was their guest and need not help. He didn’t see that she needed to.

That route to make herself useful closed, she’d thought that perhaps if she bought some groceries, and contributed that way, she’d feel better; feel less like a fifth wheel or a parasite. That had been wrong, too. Castle had been writing, lost in creative dreams, when she’d come back. The bitter memory was still sharp.

“Oh,” Alexis had said, with an undercurrent of disparagement. “We always shop at Whole Foods Market. We only buy organic.” As if her purchases were deficient. She’d put them in the fridge anyway, but three days later she hadn’t been given the slightest chance to cook, and the groceries were still there, untouched. Beckett hadn’t mentioned it to Castle, who in turn hadn’t mentioned it right back. By the next day, they’d quietly disappeared.

Castle, in fact, had seemed to be avoiding her. She’d thought that they were – well, easy with each other. She’d thought – who cares what she thought? What does it matter? He’d been almost remote, under the comfortable, practiced charm. Sometimes she’d thought he was about to say something, but then there was always someone else around. On the rare occasions she might have had the chance to talk to him, Alexis had needed something, or come to tell him something, or simply been there, and Beckett was entirely unwilling to open any sort of a conversation in front of her. If it was too late for Alexis, it was Martha, with whom at least there was no undercurrent of tension, but who was equally often present.
Talking in the precinct was likewise impossible. The case was relentless, and there was never a moment when there weren’t others present.

In desperation, she’d taken to staying at work as long as she could, to avoid the uncomfortable atmosphere and glances. And, of course, to avoid Castle. It had become clearer and clearer that staying at the loft had been a serious mistake. She doesn’t, even now, know why he offered.

It had taken her less than a week of intensive searching, even before the case was done, to find a new apartment. She’d been damn lucky, but by that point she’d have taken a shared room in a brothel in the Bronx to get out. The collective relief on the faces of Alexis and, to a lesser extent, Martha, when she’d said that she’d be moving out in less than a further week had confirmed her view that she should never have accepted Castle’s invitation in the first place. Castle hadn’t said anything: neither obviously relieved nor disappointed. She hadn’t asked for his help to move. She hadn’t enough possessions left that any help would have been needed, and she wouldn’t impose on him further. She’d been enough of an imposition.

Ever since then it had been awkward. Nothing had been said, nothing discussed. Castle had never mentioned it again, and she felt there was a distance between them. She’d thought… but it doesn’t matter, now. They still worked together, and they still solved crimes. He had still brought coffee for her, so maybe it had just been a blip. (But she knew it wasn’t. It was all different.) She had hoped it was just a blip: staying at the loft a step too far that he didn’t know how to get out of after it spilled from his mouth. Maybe it was just the stress of his family being – quite clearly – unhappy with it. Maybe they could have gone back to where they were.

Maybe. But alone in her new apartment where nothing was quite where it should be, where so many things were missing because she hadn’t replaced them yet: where she kept tripping on empty spaces and adding them to a list of things to buy, when the insurance came through, when she got her next pay cheque… late at night and alone, she knew that there was something else missing, something else which wasn’t where it should be.

Maybe then she had cried, a little.

It doesn’t matter now. He doesn’t care, and he never cared, and it had all only been a stupid little fantasy with nothing to back it up. Well, now she knows the truth.

He never wanted her. He never will.

Castle had left right away after Demming had dropped his little bombshell. Of course he’d known that Demming was interested in Beckett. Couldn’t miss it: the man was wandering around with his tongue hanging out. Whenever he was around, a mop was needed to wipe the drool from the floor. Still, he hadn’t expected that Demming would ask her out already.

He hadn’t expected that she would accept. Why else would Demming have checked if he was interested? The worst thing is, that he, Castle, would have liked Demming, in other circumstances. He’s a decent enough guy, and Robbery sounds pretty interesting as a foil to Homicide.

He supposes he should have seen it coming. He’d provided Beckett with a place to stay, and that’s where it had all started to go wrong. He’d had to push her into accepting, with Montgomery’s active connivance, but she’d been grateful and happy and even a little clingy (that is to say, clingy for Beckett. What that means, is that she had left with him and shared the cab and even not twisted his ear when he’d – not quite accidentally – laid his hand over hers). He’d thought it would all give him a chance to move things forward.
Instead, he’s ten steps back.

It had all started to go wrong the minute they’d got to his loft. With hindsight, perhaps he should have – not *consulted*, it’s his loft and he decides who stays, but – warned his family that Beckett would be staying. Perhaps he should have done so before they’d seen the news. They had been shocked, and not in a good way. His mother had confined herself to *Well, I suppose you couldn’t do anything else, and it’s Katherine*, which had, if not been approval, had certainly not been disapproval. She had, of course, added a small lecture on not getting his hopes up, since he’d screwed up so badly last summer, but on balance she’d been okay about it.

Alexis had been a totally different matter. He’d never thought his *daughter* would be a problem. She’d been furious with him, all in whispers so that Beckett wouldn’t hear it. She’d accused him of having no care for their safety. Of course he’d set Alexis straight, but it hadn’t been a good start. Still, after he’d read her the riot act about Beckett being their *guest*, she’d reset her thinking. In fact, she’d been really considerate: making sure that Beckett didn’t need to lift a finger even though she’d offered every time. He’d been proud of her behaviour.

The only slight fly in the ointment had been that he’d never seemed to get a chance to be alone with Beckett. He couldn’t neglect Alexis, who’d needed his input for a number of matters: troubles at school, and his mother, as ever, had been impervious to hints. Beckett herself hadn’t exactly been available: she’d been working on the case, when there was no chance to talk in private, and then when she got back to the loft, which had become some time after he did, she’d gone to her room early, in order not to interfere with Alexis’s issues. He’d thought that was totally considerate, too.

Perhaps it was as well. He’d been desperate to take the look of shock and pain and terror from her eyes; to take her to his bed and simply coddle and cosset her until she was comforted and eased, but he’d thought that maybe it was too much, too soon, too suffocating; or worse, using proximity to push her a little faster or harder or further than she would really want. So he hadn’t tried to force the issue when at the loft, and assumed that he’d get a chance shortly.

And then she’d come home – well. There’s another problem in his thinking. It’s his home, and he was and is thinking about it as *their* home – and announced that she’d found a new apartment, and the deal was so good she couldn’t afford not to take it. She’d be moving out again in a week. *Out from under your feet*, she’d said, and he couldn’t read her face at all. He’d been so shocked that he’d been completely unresponsive, and then she’d – naturally, not that it helped at all – been working on the cases and then in her room and Alexis had still been having massive issues at school (teen friendships, ugh: one needs to be Von Clausewitz to come out ahead in those wars; even Machiavelli would have problems) and needed more of his time than at any point since she’d started high school.

And so he’d never managed to talk about it with her, and couldn’t tell her how unhappy he was that she was leaving, and how much he wanted her to stay for longer. He’d never got a minute alone with her even then. She’d moved herself out: hadn’t asked for help. *It’s only a suitcase, Castle*, she’d said, with a miserably bitter edge, *everything else is gone*, and of course she didn’t need help with one single solitary suitcase.

And since then, he’s had the very uncomfortable feeling that they’re drifting apart, and he doesn’t know why and hasn’t asked. *She’s walked away, and he’s not running after her. He hasn’t seen her new apartment. He shouldn’t be worried, because no-one’s seen her new apartment, but he is. He’d have thought that she would at least invite him over for takeout and a glass of wine, but no. He hasn’t mentioned it, waiting for her to start the conversation, but she hasn’t started any conversations except about cases. She just does not care, and he is both hurt and seriously pissed*
about it.

Not that it’s been helped by that damn actress. He’d been so pleased that the option to film Nikki had been taken up, but then he’d been – well, accosted – by Ellie Monroe, and he is sure that Beckett thinks he’d slept with her. He hadn’t, but it hadn’t been for want of her trying, in an entirely obvious and public fashion.

So currently Beckett is as barriered as she’s ever been, a thin glass wall behind her eyes and blocking her from him: and because she isn’t opening conversations neither is he, and he hasn’t the faintest idea where to begin.

But now, of course, there is the presence of Detective Tom Demming. Tall and handsome, and apparently a nice guy. He should have said that yes, there is something going on. Should have told him to back off, Beckett was his, even if she isn’t. Should have done something, anything, to stop it cold. But instead he’d said that there was no flag on the play, and walked from the gridiron, forfeiting the game.

He’s distracted over dinner, and when the cleaning up is done, retreats to his office to stare at his screen and wonder why it’s all gone so horribly wrong, when it should all have been going perfectly right. He’d thought that they were approaching a new milestone, and instead he’s back to square one, and worse, he’ll have to watch Beckett getting together with Demming, and he’ll know he didn’t even try to stop it.

He sits alone in his office, sips his coffee and tries not to look at the whiskey bottle, and wishes he could see inside her head. Still, he’ll be there tomorrow, with her coffee. They can just be friends, and that will be just fine.

He doesn’t want to be friends. He’d never wanted simply to be friends.

“Where’s Demming?” Espo asks, early the next morning. “Thought he was gonna be new man on the team?”

“He’s done,” Beckett says, in a way that doesn’t invite questions. That doesn’t stop Espo.

“Yeah? Thought you wanted him on this case?”

“Nah. Wouldn’t have fitted. One person too many.”

Espo subsides, but thinks considerably the more. He and Ryan have noticed that Beckett’s been a little off for weeks now. She’s working just a little harder, a little more intensely, ever since she got blown up. They can’t put their finger on what’s wrong, because she banter and glares and rolls her eyes at them just as ever; Castle banter and makes or brings coffee just as ever; she dishes out orders and suggestions and solves cases just as well as ever: no hint of a problem. But something’s up.

When Beckett disappears on some new criminal-catching trail, Espósito turns to Ryan.

“What’s with her? I thought it was just bein’ blown up, but ‘s still somethin’.”

“Dunno. She moved outta Castle’s in a few days, though. Found a good deal an’ took it.”

“You’re kiddin’ me? Moved out? I’d thought he’d’ve moved heaven an’ earth to keep her there.”

“Seems not. Anyway, who’s gonna stop Beckett doin’ whatever she wants when she’s got a plan in
“Dunno,” Espo says. “She’s shoved Demming off the team, though.”

Ryan’s eyes widen. “Yeah? Oh boy. Thought he was gettin’ around to askin’ for a date.”

“Me too. Guess he thought better of it.”

“Or she blew him out.”

“We should find out,” Espo says, and adds virtuously at Ryan’s look of terror, “in case he knows anythin’ more. He was a good enough guy when I was back in the 54th. No reason you ‘n’ me need to burn any bridges.”

“Okay,” Ryan says, still nervously.

“I’ll have coffee if you’re making one,” says Beckett from the break room door. “If not, we got a lead.” Which the boys accurately translate as Time to get your asses in gear and do some work.
Castle arrives some time later, bearing coffee, as ever, and casts a swift, unreasonably jealous glance around. Demming is not there. He presumes that he’s been, discussed leads, and gone again. No doubt he’ll be back pushing into interrogations later.

Beckett looks up, says Hey in a cool, unemotional fashion which gives him precisely no clue as to how she feels, just like every day in the last four weeks, and tuts at her screen and papers.

“What’s up?”

“Surveillance tapes showed up some suspects. They’re being picked up.”


“No.”

“Oh?”

“He’s following up some other leads,” Beckett says. It’s not an outright lie. She is perfectly sure Demming is following up other leads, on other cases. But there is absolutely no way she’s going to admit to Castle that she’d been utterly humiliated by the attitude which the two men had adopted. It’s a discussion she simply won’t open. Castle doesn’t care, and she’s not going to reveal that she had wanted him to care. She’ll put on a brave face and get over it. At least she hadn’t wasted more than half a day on that jerk.

Castle subsides, drinks his coffee, messes with his phone, and eventually their suspects come in and he has a nice interrogation to play with instead of his phone. Interrogation, in which Demming does not figure, is only vaguely helpful: but some hard tugging on a very flimsy string, and the intervention of IA, brings a rather more worrying situation. Esposito’s old partner seems to have gone bad, and in watching Espo take off like a terrier after a rat, Castle forgets to wonder where Demming is until after Espo’s back, after they’ve found that the dirty cop is neither Espo’s partner nor Demming (Montgomery had intervened to keep Demming occupied for long enough for his phone to be stripped, but in the process they had uncovered his alibi), after Demming has made his excuses and left, much to Castle’s surprise: and after all of that, their killer turns out to be the IA cop who’d intervened.

It leaves a very bad taste in everyone’s mouth, and even the remarkable speed with which they’ve solved the case doesn’t cheer the team in any way.

Castle opens his mouth, but Beckett’s already claiming that she’s got things to do that night, and he’s not up for a boys’ night with Ryan and Esposito. He plods out, and trudges home.

“Hey, pumpkin,” he says, striving for some enthusiasm.

“Hey, Dad. How’s the case?”

“Solved,” he says heavily. “Dirty cop.”

“Isn’t that good? If the dirty cop is in jail, I mean?”

“Yeah, it is.” He turns towards his office.
“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” Alexis regards him very parentally. “Nothing.”

“Has Detective Beckett upset you again?”

“Again? No. We’re getting along just fine. We don’t live in each other’s pockets.” More’s the pity. I wanted us to.

“Okay, good. You don’t need to spend all your time with her. You’ve got a book to write,” says Alexis, curiosity apparently satisfied. Castle turns away to his office, and lurks there, gloomily, for the remains of the evening.

Beckett has also gone home. Home. It doesn’t feel like home. It’s just a space she inhabits. She can’t afford to replace everything, or indeed most things, till her insurance pays up or she’s had several more pay cheques – the latter being more likely to happen first: insurance payments being notoriously slow to arrive.

She gazes round at the echoing, empty space. She had prioritised a bed, clothes and closet, towels and kitchen equipment over everything else, so she’s only just taken delivery of a small, cheap desk and chair. This weekend, she’s got a couch arriving. It’ll do, for now. It’s not like she’s got anywhere else to live.

She makes herself a hasty, tasteless dinner: eaten as quickly as it’s made, washes up – no dishwasher yet – and only then changes to shapeless sweats and tee. At least her Kindle could rapidly be re-stocked. She sits on her bed, propped against her pillows (trying not to remember the plump, expensive pillows of Castle’s loft), and reads till she showers, then reads some more, until, at last, she sleeps.

Her dreams are as unhappy as they have been for five weeks, and she wakes as barely refreshed as any other morning. She hasn’t slept well since her previous apartment went up in flames. Being blown up will do that to you, it seems. No doubt she’ll get over it.

Sitting at her desk, waiting for the next body to drop – won’t be long: this is Manhattan, after all – and tidying up the existing pile of unsolved cases, she has an idea. It’s been a week: surely one of Lanie or O’Leary is free for a drink by now. She taps out a pair of texts, and feels much better for it. She feels even better when she has replies. That’s two more nights she won’t be staring at the bare wall.

Esposito, now the case is done, has remembered that he’d been a bit surprised that Demming, having seemingly been picked up for the team and definitely hankering after Beckett (so not cool, that), had left again as quickly as he’d arrived. Practically the same moment, in fact. Not being dumb, and also not particularly impressed that Beckett and Castle appear to be on rather tense terms, again, he thinks that some beers with Demming might be a plan. Just to make sure that he and Demming are still cool, naturally. You never know when you might need your pals in other divisions. He constructs a quick text, and receives an equally rapid response, which causes him to raise his eyebrows. Sure, Espo. It’ll be good to clear the air.

The day wears on, without anything interesting happening. At least, not until the late afternoon, when they are hauled out to an alley round the back of a very smart, boutique hotel. Beckett calls Castle with no particular enthusiasm, and he arrives there only shortly after they do.

The corpse is a woman: bloodied, beaten and, originally, beautiful; though after being stuffed
behind a large Dumpster her good looks are much less obvious. According to Lanie’s initial examination, she appears to have been shot, though there are no defensive wounds apparent, which is the first peculiarity. The second is that there is no form of identification at all, although that is readily explainable by the third peculiarity: that her dress is barely sufficient to cover her, quite stunning, body. There’s nowhere to keep any ID, or indeed anything else.

“Hell of a looker,” Espo says bleakly. He’s not wrong. She’s easily five foot ten, and most of it is legs. Even Beckett, a woman in possession (though she does say so herself) of an excellent pair of extra-long legs, envies those legs. Well. She would have done, had they been attached to a live woman.

“One more thing,” Lanie says, prodding delicately. “I’ll need to get a proper look, but this beating looks like post mortem to me.”

“Huh?” Beckett says, echoed by the three men. That’s weird. Looks like this is a properly Beckett-flavoured case. Good. It’ll stop her moping. She needs to get her head out her ass and move on.

“After death.”

“I know that, Lanie!” Beckett says exasperatedly. “That’s not normal, though.”

“No. Hmm. I think I’ll put the hurry-up on tox. There might be something hinky in the bloods.”

Beckett doesn’t disagree. “Okay. We’ve no ID, so” –

“She must be a spy,” Castle says, unhelpfully. “She could be Jane. Jane Bond.”

Espo makes a derisive noise. Ryan boggles. “Not likely, man. How’s she gonna fire a gun with those nails?”

The nails are long, well manicured, and decorated with a complex swirl of patterns. They do not look as if any form of manual work, including washing up, had ever touched them.

“Takes me three hours at the nail bar to get that look,” Lanie says callously. “Guess this girl didn’t need to work.”

“Like I said, a spy. With a really glamorous cover story.”

“Not likely, Castle,” Beckett points out wearily. “Most likely she’s a high-end escort who got in with a bad john.”


“No. No spies. No Bonds.” She turns to Lanie. “Let me know. How big is the backlog this time?”

“Prints by first thing tomorrow. Tox – mm, maybe three days? Rest of it, I’ll see what I can do. After all, I got an incentive, don’t I?”

“Do you?”

“Thought you said we were going out Friday? I don’t wanna miss out on a night out.”

“Yeah. Okay. If you can manage tox by then too, I’ll buy the first three.”

“Now that’s an incentive,” Lanie says very happily.
“Bribery is a felony,” Ryan mutters darkly.

“Nothing to do with bribery. I just wanna get your information as fast as I can,” Lanie says piously.

“What about time of death?”

“Likely a day or two ago. I’ll have a better idea later on. Lemme get her back to the lab and my slab.”

Lanie and corpse depart, apparently in perfect harmony with each other, which is only a very little bit creepy. The team pokes around for a little bit, without any real success.

“We’ll get uniforms to go through the Dumpsters,” Beckett says to general relief. “I don’t see anything obvious, like her purse or even a small wallet.”

“She didn’t have enough dress to fit a pocket in,” Castle points out.

Beckett manages not to spit out an irritable you’d know, wouldn’t you? which would be unjustifiable and nasty. Just because he doesn’t want to date her, is no reason for her to behave unpleasantly. She will be civil, and pleasant, and adult. It’s just fine if he only wants to be mildly friendly. And besides, it’s vilely arrogant to think that she’s so much of a catch that he couldn’t resist her.

*If only you’d been able to resist him.*

Well, she’ll get this case moving. The victim, whoever she was: streetwalker or escort or simply an unlucky ordinary woman on a night out; deserves her full attention.

“Okay,” Beckett says briskly. “We all know the routine. Street cam footage, canvassing by uniforms first, we’ve had a look around to see if we can spot anything, and haven’t – no shell casing, Espo? You usually find those first.”

“Benefits of bein’ a sniper,” Espo preens, “but naw, no casings. CSU’ll do the full sweep soon’s we get outta their way.”

“Might as well get out the way now,” Beckett agrees. “They’ll find us anything there is to be found.”

“You know what’s really odd?” Castle muses. “She didn’t have a phone. Every escort I’ve ever met had a phone.”

The frozen chill of three cop stares indicates that he’s gone too far.

“You meet many escorts, Castle?”


“Ri-ight.” Even Ryan doesn’t sound convinced.

“Really. I’ve never used an escort service for that.” He clamps his mouth shut before he can be any further up shit creek by saying *I’ve never needed to.* That is absolutely not likely to help in any way at all, and he’s in enough trouble as it is.

“Mm,” the boys hum sceptically. Castle looks pathetically at them. Beckett doesn’t look at Castle or the boys.
“Let’s get back,” she says briskly. Castle follows her to the cruiser, the boys depart for their own transport, and the scene is left to the CSU sweepers, swarming over it like predatory ants in search of the tiniest clue to take back to their labs.

“She was stunning,” Castle says thoughtfully, in the car.

“Yeah,” Beckett says cynically. “Lanie’ll tell us how much work she had done to look like that.”

“You look like that, and you haven’t had work done.”

Beckett hides her wince. *Thanks, Castle. Good enough to look at but not good enough to date. How do you know?”* she flips back. “I could be the product of surgical brilliance.” She’s not.

“Only if you’d had serious injuries and needed plastic surgery,” Castle argues. “You’d never be bothered, otherwise.”

“You don’t know me half as well as you think you do,” Beckett says. “You’ll just have to wonder.”

Castle thinks that there might have been a subtext to the first sentence, but if there had been it’s so subterranean that he has no hope of extracting it. Anyway, Beckett’s just messing with him. He’s sure she’d never have plastic surgery. He subsides. Beckett’s remoteness is not improving with proximity or compliments.

“Beckett?” he begins, hoping to open a discussion.

“Yeah? Can it wait a minute while I park?”

Oh. They’re already at the precinct. Chance gone. “It’s not important.”

“Kay. Let’s go set up the board.”

She leads them up to the bullpen, picks up a whiteboard pen, and draws a timeline at the bottom of the board. It looks rather forlorn, all on its own with only two data points. They don’t even have a cleaned up photo, yet. She glares impartially at the board and at the surroundings, which naturally includes all of Castle, Ryan and Espo, which last scowls impartially back.

Before Castle can say anything, or indeed before Beckett actually sets fire to her board through the sheer ire of her gaze, her phone rings.

“Beckett?”

“Hey. Yeah” – she looks at her watch – “half an hour, okay?”

“See you there. Bye.”

She doesn’t say who called, or who she’s evidently meeting. Castle assumes it’s Demming, and has to fight very hard to control both his expression and his tongue.

“Right. We’re not going to get anything more tonight. CSU should start to send stuff over in the morning – we ought to have prints by nine – and then we’ll work out the best plan when we’ve got an ID.”

She slips off the desk on which she’d been sitting and starts to tidy away her papers. Esposito is almost equally rapid to clear up, which leaves Castle and Ryan gazing rather plaintively at each other as the other two hit the elevator.
“We’ve been ditched,” Ryan whines miserably.

“Yeah,” Castle agrees. “Let’s go get a beer and drown our sorrow.”

“Who’re you meeting, Beckett? Sounded like a date.”

“O’Leary. You know, my pal out of Central Park.”

“You mean your pet mountain? Sounds like a date to me.”

“He’d be more interested in you, Espo. You know that. Stop messing with me. Anyway, he’s all loved up with Pete. They’re practically married.”

“So why’s he havin’ a drink with you?”

“I’m bored of looking at my empty walls,” Beckett says, with more truth than she’d intended to reveal.

“When are we gonna see this new apartment, then? You been in there more than a month already an’ no-one’s seen it. Time you had a housewarmin’.”

“Not till I’ve got some furniture.”

“Huh?”

“I need some chairs, and a table. Nowhere to put your drink, otherwise. That’s another weekend’s shopping trip.”

“Huh,” Esposito punctuates. “Takin’ you a while.”

“That’s ‘cause I want my apartment to look nice, not like I stocked it from the nearest Dumpster.” She goes on the attack. “Where are you going? Got a date?”

“Naw. Meetin’ some pals from back in the day.”

The elevator reaches the ground, and they part.

Beckett takes the subway to the bar where she’s meeting O’Leary, and gets there first. She acquires a quiet table with a reasonable amount of legroom, and orders a couple of beers. She knows what O’Leary drinks — they’ve been friends for several years, since he’d mistakenly arrested her during a Vice op in her rookie period, and then they’d been in the same precinct for a while. He’d been there for her during the worst times; and in return she’s been there for him. They’ve a lot of history, she and he, and she is utterly delighted that he’s found his Pete.

There is a vibration through the floor, and O’Leary rumbles in. O’Leary is big. Well, huge. He’s six-ten upwards, and wide in proportion, and it’s all muscle. You wouldn’t want to meet him in a dark alley: muscles, buzz cut and all – unless you knew him. Beckett knows him, and knows that for his friends he’s as soft as taffy.

“Beckett,” he rumbles happily, in his totally deceiving hayseed drawl. (He’s never been on a farm in his life. Beckett’s not sure he’s ever been further than the Bronx.) “Good to see you.”

“You too,” she smiles. “Been a few weeks. What’ve you been up to?”

“Too many murders. I dunno what’s wrong with the Park this month,” he says dolefully.
“Ev’rybody fightin’ and stabbin’ each other.” He shakes his massive head, and slurps at his beer. “They should all just get along.”

“We’d be out of a job, if they did,” Beckett says cynically.

“True,” he hums, sounding like the world’s largest bumble bee. “So, how’s the new place?”

“Bare. Still looking for furniture I like.”

“Hmmm. You’ve been in over a month already.”

“Yeah,” Beckett says dispiritedly.

“Doesn’t sound like it’s much of a home yet.”

“No,” she replies, even more dispiritedly.

“Why did you move outta Castle’s loft so fast? You shoulda stayed there and got yourself a bit more fixed up.”

“It wasn’t working out. They didn’t want me there. Best just to be shot of it all.”

“Mmm. D’you ever tell Castle that?”

“No point. He wasn’t bothered I went.” She breathes deeply, painfully. “He’s not bothered at all.”

“Oh? Funny that, ’cause I thought from what you was sayin’ he was behavin’ like he was pretty keen on you.” O’Leary regards her under his broom-sized eyebrows.

“Yeah, well. He’s not. So let’s talk about something else, okay? If I wanted girl-talk I’d be talking to Lanie.”

Conversation moves on, the level of beer drops, rises with a new bottle, and drops again.

Over in a very testosterone heavy, dingy bar in Queens, Esposito has got in the beers and fries, and grins in a comradely fashion as Demming gives him a casual wave and joins him. Half of their beers are gone before anything much is said. Talk is cheap, but good beer should be savoured.

“So what went down the other week?” Esposito asks. “I thought you were comin’ along on the team, least for that case, but you weren’t there two minutes. You barely got to do one interrogation with Beckett – first one – an’ then you were gone.”

“So did I,” Demming says, somewhat bitterly. “I don’t know what got into Beckett. One minute she’s up for a drink, next minute she told me I was an asshole and threw me out.”

“Gotta be more to it than that, bro. You ain’t that bad.” Espo takes the news that Demming had asked Beckett out in his stride.

“I don’t know,” Demming repeats. “I even made sure I wasn’t treading on that writer’s toes. I thought he might be interested, but he was pretty definite he wasn’t.”

Espo chokes on his beer. “You asked Castle if he was dating Beckett?” he pushes out through the choking. “Man, are you crazy?”

“What?”
“He’s been moonin’ over her since he got to the Twelfth.”

“He’s not mooning now. He said he wasn’t interested. I was a bit surprised, but he said it.”

“Huh?” Esposito emits thoughtfully. Up till today, he wouldn’t have believed the uninterested bit for a moment. He does believe that Castle said it, though he thinks Castle was a complete dumbass to do so, but then in his own way Castle’s got as much poisonous pride as Beckett, and it’s pretty damn obvious that it’d come to the front. Well, if that’s where he’s goin’, Espo is going to let him stew. He’s got Beckett’s back, first, last and always, an’ if Castle’s gonna say he’s not interested, then Espo’s gonna take him at his word.

“So why’d she bail on you? Like I said, you ain’t that bad. You don’t stink, and you’re mostly clean, when you’re not dropping ketchup down your shirt” – Demming looks down – “Gotcha.”

Demming laughs, a little unwillingly. “‘S if you’re God’s gift, Espo. You struck out more often than not, back in the day.” Espo grins back. “Anyway, she overheard. Didn’t like it. Threw me out.”

“Huh. Guess it’s her loss. Or gain.” Espo manages not to react to learning that Beckett had heard Castle write her off, but his temper is up.

“Whatsoever. There’s plenty more fish in the sea.”

“Yeah. Hope they like ketchup.”

Demming fakes a punch, which Espo parries, and the evening passes in a haze of cop-man shop-talk and beer.
Who I want to be

In yet another bar: this one Castle’s choice and therefore completely unfamiliar to Ryan, the two wallflowers plonk themselves down with beer and snacks. Baseball is the opening topic of choice, followed by more beer and basketball.

When Castle summons yet more beer and starts on football, about which he knows nothing and cares less, Ryan decides that he’s had enough of the painful sight of Castle trying to pretend he can talk about sport.

“What’s up, man?” he asks. “You’ve been off ever since that dirty cop case, an’ you weren’t much happier before that?” He decides to cut to the chase. “What’s Beckett done to upset you?”

“Nothing.”

“Liar,” Ryan says mildly. “Before she got her apartment blown up you were cool. Ever since she got her new place you aren’t.”

“Circumstantial evidence isn’t proof,” Castle says with irritation.

“See, you’re getting riled already.”

“Nothing’s wrong. If she wants to date muscle-bound cops, it’s nothing to do with me.”

“Doesn’t sound like it,” Ryan says neutrally. “Sounds like you’re a bit pissed about it. Why’d she move out so quick?”

“No idea. Up to her.”

Ryan pours another beer down his throat, and decides to try one last go to get the story. “If I was you, I’d be a bit pissed too. Put her up, treated her nice, and she moves out in ten minutes an’ she’s been backin’ off ever since. Bit rude, I’d say.” He watches Castle chug down another bottle. “D’you ask her why?”

Castle shrugs. “Not interested. Demming’s welcome to her. He even asked me if I minded.”

Ryan squawks. “He did what? Asked you?”

“Yeah. God knows why. Anyway, he can have her.”

“Your call, man,” Ryan says, thinking *Esposito will have a cat when he finds that out*. Esposito is very protective about Beckett. Totally unnecessarily, since Beckett is quite capable of protecting herself, and gets pretty wound up if anyone implies that she can’t.

“They’re out tonight,” Castle mumps into his beer.

“Doubt it.”

“Uh?”

“Beckett pushed Demming off the case. Didn’t sound too happy with him.”

“Probably just making sure her private life didn’t get in the way of the job.”
Ryan gives up, though he’s quite surprised that Castle hadn’t known that Demming had been kicked out. Usually Castle knows pretty much everything. “So what about the Knicks’ chances?” he distracts, and the evening turns.

Beckett gets in early, not precisely refreshed by her night out with O’Leary, who has the beer capacity of a brontosaurus (and is much the same size). Not that she’s dumb enough to try to match him, but, unusually, seeing him hadn’t really comforted her any. Maybe seeing Lanie tonight will be better. Girls’ night out, and girl talk. She’s not very good at girl talk, but Lanie knows when to make soothing noises and keep passing the vodka, and she’s pretty good at comforting advice too. Which is pretty much what Beckett needs, right now. Vodka, soothing noises and comforting advice.

She powers up her computer, checks her e-mail, and right there is the preliminary report from CSU, which has prints and an ID. Marvellous. Some focused effort later, there is also a photo, a social security number, and there will shortly be an employment history. Excellent. She smiles happily at her more decorated murder board. Now, if Ryan gets footage, and Esposito does a bit of digging into phone records and supervises (also known as intimidates) the canvassing uniforms, she can go and talk to next of kin. The social security number will give her, with a bit more effort, enough to do that. She sets to work.

In support of her resolution to be civil, pleasant and professional, she calls Castle as soon as she’s found the next of kin details and invites him to meet her at the precinct so they can go see them. It’s the parents, which is always even more upsetting for the relatives. Children shouldn’t die before their parents.

Melinda Carnwath’s parents reside in a nice house in Ridgewood, New Jersey: manicured garden with pretty, sweet smelling flowers in neat beds, two cars in the drive. It’s very peacefully suburban. She knocks.

“Hello?” says a middle aged woman, elegantly attractive and very similar to her daughter.

“Mrs Lisette Carnwath? Detective Beckett, NYPD, and my associate, Mr Castle.” She shows her badge.

“Oh, er, hello?”

“I’m sorry to have to tell you,” Beckett starts, and Mrs Carnwath’s colour drains before she’s completed the sentence.

“Melinda? What’s happened to my baby?”

“I’m sorry, Mrs Carnwath, but Melinda was found murdered in Manhattan late yesterday.”

Mrs Carnwath bursts into tears. Through her distress, she gestures them into a stylish but lived-in main room which reminds Beckett slightly of Castle’s loft: smart, but clearly inhabited by a family. Not like her apartment, she thinks acridly, and converts that into an unobtrusive scan around. There are several photos of Melinda. In each of them she’s beautiful: poised and perfect.

“Can you tell me about Melinda?” Beckett says softly.

“She was always pretty,” her mother says. “Worked hard at school, but then she was spotted by a model agency, just before graduation. We looked into the agency: did all sorts of checking – you hear such awful things – but finally we let her.” Her tears flow faster. “If we’d never allowed it, she’d still be here,” she weeps.
Beckett allows her the space to compose herself. Mrs Carnwath sniffs a few times, blows her nose, and is quiet.

“It’s not your fault,” Beckett says, with quiet force. “It’s all on the killer, and I will do my best to find them.” She takes a breath. “Now, could you tell me who she was working for, and how long she’d been there?”

“It was the Stardance Model Agency,” comes the reply. Beckett makes a note.

“And did she have a partner?”

“No-one serious. No-one she’d bring home. She was only twenty-two,” she sobs.

“Was there anyone who had a quarrel with her?” Castle asks, gently.

“No, nobody. Everyone liked her.”

Beckett, and from their single exchanged glance Castle too, is deeply sceptical about that.

Modelling is not a notable hotbed of peace, love and mutual support, as Beckett is perfectly well aware. Been there, done that, made enough in a summer to fund a healthy proportion of her college fees. She’d hated every last minute of it: all the hypercritical eyes looking for a flaw, the constant focus on looks and (lack of) weight, the bitching and the jealousy, and in the background the drugs and the escort agencies and the sleaze. Oh, does she know about modelling.

“Was there anyone at all who’d got a problem with her, even if it wasn’t someone she knew?”

“No-one. Nobody at all.”

Beckett thinks. “Anything connected with any jobs she took? Anything new there?”

“No,” Mrs Carnwath weeps. “She wasn’t moving on. Everything was through Stardance.”

“Okay, thank you,” Beckett says. There isn’t anything more to be gained here. “We might have more questions as matters progress. We might need to come back to you. We’ll want to talk to your husband, too, just in case he knows anything else.”

“Anything.”

They take their leave, with both Melinda’s phone number to start trying to get those records, and Mr Carnwath’s contact details. They feel, in a now rare moment of thinking alike, that it might be easier if he weren’t trying to deal with his wife’s misery at the same time as answering their questions.

As soon as she gets in the car Beckett is on to the precinct to get Ryan running down anything he can find out about the Stardance model agency. She snaps her phone off with relief that they can pursue a track, and turns on the engine to go back to the city.

Castle glances at Beckett’s profile, which isn’t telling him anything about her date last night. He is intensely curious. Well. That’s a nice way to put it. He is intensely jealous that someone else should have taken her for a date. All his covering bravado with Ryan hadn’t helped at all, but he’s not going to let on to the boys (no matter Ryan’s sympathy for him) how he really feels.

“D’you have a good time last night?” he asks, forcing his voice to neutrality.

“Fine,” Beckett says, which is both uninformative and indicates that the conversation should not be
continued. Castle doesn’t know if that’s a hint that the date didn’t go well (which is probably wishful thinking) or much more likely, that she simply isn’t going to discuss it with him.

“Good,” he says, neutrally.

Good? Well, what was she expecting? Sudden manifestations of jealousy (she should hope)? No. He’s perfectly happy and uninterested. The old Castle would have prodded and pushed and pried for the whole story, and probably then made a few flip, suggestive remarks to indicate that she’d have had a better (and hotter) time with him. Not any more. Another sharp stiletto slice lacerates her heart. She varnishes another layer over her pain, and lets conversation die.

“So who was Beckett seeing last night? Thought she’d kicked Demming to the kerb?”

The boys are taking a break from their searching for clues to search for coffee.

“That any of your business, bro?”

“Well, you’re the one who’s pals with both of them. An’ it is my business. It’s team business. Unless she was on a date with you,” Ryan adds nastily.

“Hell no!” Esposito growls. “We don’t roll that way. Jesus, Ryan, what d’you think I am?”

“So who were you seeing?” Espo doesn’t answer for a moment. “Hang on,” Ryan says. “You were pals with Demming back in the day. So if you were out with him – you were, weren’t you?” – Esposito meets Ryan’s eyes with a blackly irate scowl – “Yeah, you were – are you gonna tell Castle that?”

“Why?” Esposito emits flatly. “He don’t want Beckett.”

“How’d you know that?”

“Said so to Demming. Told him the field was clear. So he’s sayin’ he don’t care. So why should I tell him anythin’? ”

“You believed that crap?”

“Don’t matter. He said it.”

Oh, Christ. Espo’s made his mind up and changing that’s going to be like unsetting concrete. “He said the same to me, an’ I didn’t believe him for a minute. He was sulking about her being out with Demming last night, but she couldn’t have been, ‘cause you were. So where was she?”

“Out,” Esposito bites. “None of your business who she was out with.”

“You really think that’s gonna help? Beckett’s been off since the bomb, and it wasn’t just her apartment bein’ blown up around her. Demming screwed up somehow, an’ you know how” –

“I don’t,” Espo hits back. “He don’t, either.”

“Not the point. She’s miserable, an’ Castle’s miserable, an’ you know something that might make one of them less miserable an’ you aren’t saying. That’s not much of a pal.”

“Hell with that. I’m Beckett’s pal. Castle said he wasn’t int’rested, so he c’n live with that. I’m not lettin’ him fuck her over any more. Don’t matter if she was out with a girlfriend or a boyfriend or just a pal, it ain’t his business and it ain’t yours. He had his chance and he din’t want it.”
“I think you’re wrong,” Ryan says, with more force than Espo’s ever heard. “You’re not playing fair an’ you’re wrong. This ain’t like you.”

“He’s hurt her.”

“Yeah, an’ she’s hurt him too. So they’re both dumb.”

“He don’t want her an’ he said so,” Espo says obstinately. “So if Beckett’s goin’ out with an old pal, that’s nobody’s business but hers.”

“I still think you’re wrong,” Ryan says bleakly.

“I ain’t wrong. Beckett heard him.”

Ryan’s jaw drops. “She what?”

“She heard them. She heard Castle say Demming could have her.”

“Oh shit. Ohshitohshit.”

“’Bout right,” Esposito says laconically.

“He doesn’t know that.”

“An’ I’m not tellin’ him.”

“You should. He should know. If it’s just pride talking, you should tell him an’ give him a chance to fix it. If he doesn’t fix it, then you’re still right, ‘cause he won’t fix it. Win-win.”

“I ain’t tellin’ either of them anythin’,” Esposito says blackly.

“If you don’t, I will,” Ryan counters, and for the first time ever Espo finds Ryan on the other side of the fight from him. “’S not right that he doesn’t know. He deserves a chance to fix it.”

“Do what the hell you like,” Esposito grits. “But don’t come cryin’ when it doesn’t work out an’ Beckett ain’t happy with you. I got her back. You sure you do?”

“Just ’cause I think different to you doesn’t mean I don’t have Beckett’s back too. So don’t you come cryin’ if she thinks you screwed up.”

The bitter argument is only halted by the noise of the subjects under discussion emerging from the elevator and the bullpen.

“I’ll give it a couple of days,” Ryan concedes, reluctantly. “See what happens.” He pauses. “But after that, I’ll do what I think’s right.”

“’Kay, bro.”

They manage a bump of fists, and though they’re at odds for the first time in a very long time, the incipient quarrel is averted, for now. There is still a certain discomfort.

The slight tension between the boys is utterly buried by the tension between Beckett and Castle. They’re so painfully careful to be civil that they might as well have been trading punches. Esposito thinks he has seen less caution in a team of bomb disposal experts in a minefield.

“What d’you get from the family?”
“Just the mother. We’ll need to go talk to the father shortly. She’s fallen apart, and all she could tell us was the name of a model agency. We’ll need to talk to them too.” She thinks swiftly. “Do you two want to take the father, while we’re still waiting for footage and phone records, and we’ll go over to Stardance.”

“Reliving past glories, Beckett?” Esposito says snarkily. Castle’s mouth drops open.

“Shut up, Espo.”

“You were a model?” Castle squeaks. “How did I not know this?” He turns to the boys. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

Esposito regards him with a chilly scowl.

“Because Beckett threatened us with bullets,” Ryan says, scuttling to one side, well away from Esposito, in case the wrath of Beckett should descend. “It wasn’t me, Beckett. You heard him.”

“It was a long time ago,” she says indifferently. “It paid better than waitressing. Now, can we perhaps deal with the victim, instead of ancient history?”

There’s a sharp edge to her words that doesn’t make Esposito feel any better about his slip. He’s also none too keen on the way Castle’s eyes lit up at the idea Beckett had been a model. Shallow. Very shallow. Not interested when she’s a cop but sniffing by as soon as he knows she’s been a model. It doesn’t improve his mood.

“Let’s get going,” she says, and turns on one spiked heel for the elevator and the next stage of their initial interviews.

“You were a model?” Castle repeats, as soon as they get into the cruiser. “Why didn’t you tell me when we were investigating the dead model?”

“It wasn’t relevant. It’s not relevant now.” And guess what? she thinks sarcastically, hurt to the core all over again, as soon as I fit your pattern of models and actresses you’re interested. A cop’s not good enough.

“Proves me right when I said you hadn’t had work done.”

“It’s not relevant,” she says again. “Let’s just stick to the case.”

That’s a close-down if ever Castle’s heard one, delivered in a tone of flat disinterest which he has never before heard from Beckett’s mouth. It’s as if she couldn’t care less what he thinks about her, which is one step further down the precipitous slope of their failing not-even-a-relationship. She’s never not cared before. Been angry, or irritable, or amused, or even flirtatious, but never indifferent. His chest hurts, and his gut wrenches, and he still doesn’t have the first clue why any of this is happening.

Why she’s slipping away from him.

“Beckett,” he says, gathering up his nerve, “is something wrong?”

“No. Everything’s fine.” She takes a right, and pulls up. “We’re here.”

The sign is small and discreet; the door unassuming. Stardance, it seems, does not wish to advertise. This is not entirely surprising to either Castle or Beckett, both of whom, separately, have
worked out that the agency wouldn’t want hordes of random hopefuls appearing on the doorstep on spec.

The interior is as discreetly tasteful as the exterior was discreet. Therefore, the entry of Castle and Beckett, and Beckett’s clear, audible announcement of her status, causes a certain degree of appalled flusterment at the reception desk.

“A cop?” the immaculately groomed woman gasps? “I thought you were a candidate.” It appears that much of the flusterment has been caused by the disconnect between Beckett’s looks, Beckett’s statements, and the receptionist’s automatic and wrong assumptions.

“No,” Beckett says with strained impatience. “Now get me your CEO.”

The receptionist picks up her phone. “Mr Selwyn,” she murmurs – discreetly – “there is a Miss Beckett in reception to see you.” Beckett, Castle notes, does not correct the receptionist. Nor does she mention him.

Mr Selwyn appears in short order. He flicks an assessing, rapid, dispassionate glance over both Beckett and Castle, and makes a hurry-up gesture at them. This, Castle knows, is entirely infelicitous.

“You’ll do,” he raps. “Follow me.” He turns on an expensively shod heel to provide them with an excellent view of a fashionable haircut on a somewhat attenuated frame.

“Sorry?” Beckett says.

“Come on. The shoot’s all set up and you’re late. They’re waiting for you.”

He twists round, still in motion, and surveys her again, frowning. “You’re a bit old, but make-up can deal with that.” Castle winces. He can see trouble heading directly for this idiot, which his sharp chinos and carefully pressed designer shirt, sans tie, will certainly not prevent. Beckett is currently wordless. There is no guarantee whatsoever that this will continue for long.

“We don’t normally try out men that old either, but obviously you came as a pair. The chemistry’s good enough that it might make up for the age problem.”

He opens a door into a studio arranged to look like an upscale urban bar. “Hurry up. Strip. He’ll do, but you’re dressed far too uptight. Jose!” A small, bright Latino hurries in. “Get her dressed properly. Sexy-expensive. He can go straight to make-up. Cover up some of those lines. Carter – where’s Carter?” Whoever Carter is, he’s not there. Castle suspects it’s the photographer.

At this point, finally, Beckett recovers her voice. (And Castle his dropped jaw. Wrinkles? Him? No way.)

“Stop.”

It thuds into the room. Everyone stops dead. The CEO puffs up like an angry turkey-cock. Beckett rolls right over him.

“You appear to be misinformed,” she says with lethal emphasis on the final word, pulling back her jacket to show her shield and gun. Selwyn’s colour drains. “I am Detective Kate Beckett, NYPD. This is Richard Castle. You are who?”

The magnitude of Selwyn’s mistake is clearly dawning on him.
“Timothy J. Selwyn,” he forces out, shakily. “CEO and owner of Stardance.”
Any objection is overruled

“We are here to interview you,” Beckett emits with glacial precision. With every icy word, Selwyn cringes further away from her. “Your office will do. We’ll go up there.” He doesn’t move, possibly because he is petrified. “Now.”

Even Castle’s feet move, and he’s practised at resisting Beckett’s orders. Selwyn doesn’t stand a chance.

Shortly, they enter an expensively decorated office bedecked with industry awards. Castle seats himself on a chair designed in the style of Charlotte Perriand, which, astonishingly, is even less comfortable than it had appeared to be.

Beckett does not sit. She prowls the room, leaving the suffocating scent of wholesale intimidation spreading behind her. Selwyn, interestingly, does not sit behind his expansive desk; instead, he appears to have been terrified into taking another uncomfortable chair.

When she is apparently satisfied that Selwyn is wholly cowed, Beckett stays standing, leaning against the desk. Every inch of her posture emphasises that she owns the room.

“I’ll be recording this interview,” she says. Her tone does not admit disagreement. Selwyn does not disagree.

She hasn’t paid one single iota of attention to Castle since Selwyn had said the word chemistry, which is not reassuring at all. Before… everything… she’d at least have cast him an eye roll and a shared exchange of glances; there would have been a moment of humour and mutual appreciation. Now, as Tennyson had written, she’s icily regular, splendidly null: dead – and deadly – perfection. It’s not even that she’s excluding him – not from the investigation, anyway – she’s perfectly civil, entirely calm. It’s just that there’s no emotional response coming his way at all, as if she no longer sees the point.

Maybe, for her, there is no point. After all, she’s found someone new, and he didn’t lift a finger to stop it. Another acid roil of jealousy churns in his stomach: a developing ulcer of envy.

Beckett regards the cringing, narrow form of Selwyn with cool distaste, desperately ramming down her expanding agony from the casual reference to the chemistry that she and Castle have. Yeah. Once. Once upon a time, in some stupid, fairy-tale world that never existed – never could have existed – outside her own stupid, delusional, fan-girl head.

“Mr Selwyn,” she begins, with a bite of command which brings his head up and his gaze to hers, “tell me about Melinda Carnwath.”

“Mellie?” he stutters. “Why” –

“Answer the question.”

He wipes his brow.

“She was spotted at seventeen, nearly eighteen. A bit coltish,” he says assessingly, “but enough potential for test shoots to be worth it. Her parents were pretty protective. No problem there, we’ve nothing to hide. If parents of minors want to sit in, we’re cool. She stayed with us.”

“What did she model?”
“Clothes, shoes. Once she was twenty-one, lingerie.”

“Twenty one?” Castle asks. “Why?”

“Reputation. I’m not having teens or minors on underwear shoots. Too much chance for trouble. Other agencies can do that if they like. We don’t.”

Beckett nods, slowly. Castle observes a slight tension in her frame, and wonders.

“What was her last job?”

“With us?”

“Yes, with you. You said she stayed with you.”

Selwyn winces. “She did. But she left three weeks ago.”

“Really? So she didn’t stay with you. Anything else you’d like to lie about? Where did she go?”

“She did stay. She stopped modelling. I don’t know where she went. I never saw her on any more shoots. I thought she’d quit. So she had stayed with us for all the time she’d been modelling.”

“Would you have recognised her on other shoots? Some of them are pretty well disguised,” Castle points out.

“Yes,” Selwyn replies flatly. “We don’t have so many on our books that I wouldn’t have recognised her right away. She just dropped out of the industry.”

“Three weeks ago.”

“Yes.”

“We’ll need a list of all her shoots,” Beckett says. “And a copy of her contract with you.” Selwyn appears to be about to quibble. “Or I can come back with a warrant and a few uniformed officers. I assume you wouldn’t mistake them for models?” The edge on the final sentence and the flash of her eyes should have sliced him in half.

“It was an easy mistake to make,” he mutters. “Cops don’t look like you. Or him,” he adds as an afterthought, flicking a gesture at Castle.

“*He* isn’t a cop. He’s a consultant.”

Castle waits. Conspicuously absent from her words are the further words *he’s my partner*. The ulcer ripens into full-blown life.

“When can I have the information?” Her tone says *it better be soon.*

“I’ll get it pulled today. You’ll have it tomorrow.”

“Thank you,” Beckett says, with the same expectation of instant compliance as would any empress receiving a vassal’s tribute.

“When she was here, were there any problems? Anyone jealous of her?” Castle asks.

“No,” Selwyn emits, but it’s not convincing and Beckett pounces on it.
“Don’t give me that,” she snaps. “The modelling business is one long bitchfest. I want to know who was on her case about her weight, who she beat out to the good shoots, whose boyfriend was hitting on her, what the catfights were. If you don’t tell me now, I’ll interview every model and staff member on your books down at the precinct at my convenience. If you co-operate, I might be persuaded to be reasonable about timing.”

Castle, despite his current Beckett-induced pain, is more than a little surprised by her aggressive stance with Selwyn. She very rarely starts like this, though it’s not at all uncommon for her to use it later. Of course, having been referred to as old is hardly likely to start matters off on the right footing. For all that, he wouldn’t like to be in Timothy Selwyn’s shoes right now. The man’s withering faster than rice paper in a blast furnace.

“Er…” Selwyn stammers. Beckett merely waits, allowing sheer menace to taint the air. It takes less than five seconds for him to begin spilling his guts almost faster than Beckett’s recorder can cope with. He barely draws breath for almost fifteen minutes.

“I see,” Beckett says judicially. “And freelancers?”

Selwyn produces another spate of words, lasting five full minutes.

“I’ll want that list, too.” She pauses, purely for effect. Not that it’s necessary, since Selwyn is regarding Beckett with outright terror. “I’ll expect all the information by early tomorrow morning.” She pauses again. “We might want to speak to you again.” He shudders. “Thank you for your co-operation.” That doesn’t appear to reassure him at all. Castle thinks it wasn’t meant to.

She stalks to the door. Castle scrambles after her.

“You were pretty rough on him,” he says, after they’re safely out of the agency and out of earshot.

“I’ve met his type before. Power-hungry petty tyrants.” Castle thinks that the first word she’d thought of was probably pricks. “If you let them think they’ve got the upper hand they’re like jackals on a dead antelope. The only way to deal with them is to go in hard.”

She stops dead. Castle wonders, but doesn’t ask, how much of that diatribe had been fuelled by earlier personal experience.

“Time to get back,” she says. “Maybe Lanie’s sent something over.”

All her force and passion has dissipated: she’s returned to closed-down nullity.

“Do you think he’s a likely murderer?” Castle asks, trying to open some sort of conversation about anything at all.

“Don’t know yet. It’s possible. He could have snapped, but I’m not seeing any guts in him. More likely to badmouth her around the patch.”

Castle’s amazing ability to theorise well in advance of his facts, and indeed most people’s definition of sanity, comes to the fore.

“He could have, though. He could be running a people-trafficking ring from there, and Melinda threatened to expose him when he tried to traffic her, so he killed her and beat up the body to make it look like a late night mugging.”

There is a short silence in which agreement or indeed support or encouragement for Castle’s theory does not figure in any capacity whatsoever.
“She’d been gone from the agency for three weeks. Plenty of time to expose him.”

“But she could have been blackmailing him, and then he got tired or couldn’t pay.”

“We’ll look at her finances just like we always do. If there are unexplained deposits, then we’ll think about blackmail.”

Castle supposes that that’s the best he’ll get, which is about the best he ever gets at this stage: to wit, not being wholly shot down. In fact, it’s more of the civil, guarded, closed off neutrality. No eye rolls. No don’t be ridiculous, Castle! No engagement, no emotion, no theory building. Simply take one small piece and agree to look at it. This bit’s useful. I’ll take it up. The rest isn’t. I’ll ignore it. She’s always done that, concentrating on the practical. It’s just that she never used to be so, well, cold about it. Utilitarian. He sneaks a sidelong glance at her, and notes the shutters behind her eyes. It’s as if she doesn’t want him to read her thoughts. In Castle’s extensive experience, that invariably means that there’s something interesting in those same thoughts.

He wishes, futilely, that he’d never given Demming a clear field. He’d never expected to feel so cut off. He’d thought that he’d be absolutely fine about it.

He’s not fine about it at all.

The question is, should he bother caring about any of this, if she doesn’t care about him? He hasn’t answered that question before they reach the precinct, because all of it keeps coming back to where it began: the day she left the loft. He still doesn’t understand why she left at all.

Beckett drives back to the precinct pondering the possibilities for the next steps of her investigation. The more she ponders that, the less headspace she has for recalling dumb statements by dumber people about chemistry. There isn’t any chemistry, and being reminded of that is doing nothing to calm her emotional state. She would very much like to take a time-out, right now, in some quiet, solitary place containing chocolate, vodka and Kleenex. None of that is presently available, nor is it likely to become so, and so she’ll just have to use her alternative mechanism for coping: burying herself in work. Just like she did six weeks ago, and ever since.

When they get back, Ryan has obtained footage. It’s not astonishingly helpful. Two nondescript men, who had the sense to obscure their faces, hands and all other flesh; wearing nondescript clothing which suggests official coveralls but displays no logos whatsoever; driving a white Ford Transit, the most common type of van in existence; dragged the already beaten corpse out from the back of the van and stuffed it behind the Dumpster.

“Plates from the van,” Beckett asks wearily at the end of the recitation of how to be anonymous. She knows the answer before Esposito speaks.

“Fake,” he says disgustedly. “Good fakes.”

“So we got nothing from cameras?”

“Nothin’.”

“Phone? Financials?”

“Still waitin’ for both. Tomorrow, maybe.”

Beckett growls indeterminately at the vagaries of information flow. The boys make sympathetic noises. It’s safest.
“Tell me Lanie’s sent something through?”

“Naw. She called. Still waiting for the lab to give her tox back.” The growl is louder.

“It’s a whole lot of hurry-up-and-wait,” Ryan points out.

“I could go listen to your interview with Melinda’s dad,” Beckett thinks aloud. “It’s only just on four. Do you wanna listen to Selwyn – CEO of the agency, and start getting details for the list of names? I’ll do the same on the dad, and then we can switch.”

“Sure,” Esposito says with enthusiasm. If Beckett’s listening to grieving parents then she isn’t giving him and Ryan grief about things they can’t change.

The interview with the father reveals nothing that Lisette hadn’t already told them. Half-an hour of recorded misery later, Beckett re-enters the bullpen, trailed by Castle, who’s saying nothing more than she is, to see if the boys have done any better.

“We split it up,” Ryan says. “I got a list of models and the staff, and Espo’s taken the freelancers – here he comes.”

“What got your goat, Beckett? You went in real hard from the get-go. How’d he piss you off so fast?”

“He thought we were there for a try-out shoot,” Castle says. “He said I had wrinkles,” he adds indignantly. “I don’t have wrinkles. I take really good care of my skin.” The boys emit twin disgusted noises. “A good skincare regime is really important.”

“Can we maybe focus on the case, if you three have finished discussing beauty regimes?” Beckett snips. “Is that a list, Espo?”

“Yeah.”

“Share with the class, then?”

The lists are discussed. An interview schedule is tentatively arranged, and they start making calls to arrange times. Strangely, no-one is available at after six p.m. on a Friday night. Even more irritatingly, every single one of them has a good reason. Beckett grouses and growls and outright gripes, but it’s not changing anything. She’s still grumbling when her phone rings.


She swipes the phone off. “Lanie,” she says entirely unnecessarily.

“We got that. Where are we goin’? ‘S not fair, you not invitin’ us along. You didn’t invite us on Thursday when you were out with that mountain of yours.”

“Mountain?” Castle says blankly. Sure, Demming was tall, but he wasn’t that big. No-one answers.

“I don’t know where you’re going,” Beckett says calmly, “but Lanie and I are having a girls’ night. So unless you boys want to admit to something really special, you’re not coming with me.”

“Aw, Beckett,” Castle oozes, though it’s lacking in any real humour, “you’d love it if I came with
you” – he stops at the twin glares from Beckett and Esposito. He’d only tried it to see if they could somehow get back to normal. Seems not. He relapses into depressed silence.

“Night, all,” Beckett says. The sharp click of her heels puts a period to her leave taking.

“We could go out,” Ryan says. “I could use a beer.”

“No, thanks. Who’s the mountain?” Castle asks. Ryan and Esposito exchange glances.

“O’Leary. Huge guy, out of Central Park Precinct,” Espo says. Ryan looks as if he wants to say something, then winces, as if someone’s kicked him.

“Sure you don’t want a beer?”

“No thanks,” Castle says. “I’m going home.”

“Really sure?” Ryan asks. Esposito is conspicuously silent.

“Yeah.” Castle departs. Ryan observes the slump of his shoulders. “You should tell him,” he says.

“No way.”

Ryan sighs. He just knows that this is all going to go horribly wrong and somehow it’ll all end up being his fault.

Beckett shoves her way through a crowd of door-blocking twenty-not-a-lots who might be legal (not her problem. She only does Homicide) or, more likely, not. She’s not in the mood for obstacles standing between her and her vodka. From a table, Lanie waves and screeches her name.

“Got ‘em in, Kate. C’mon. Sit down.”

“Hey. What’ve you got?” Beckett’s only a little suspicious. Lanie likes trying out new drinks. Beckett likes the classics. Vodka tonic, on the rocks. Tonight, very easy on the tonic. And not many rocks, either.


“That’s better.”

“Got you a double. You look as if you need it, so don’t start on me.”

“Me?”

“You, girlfriend. Anyway, start talking.”

“Now who’s starting on whom?” Beckett complains.

“You’re ducking it,” Lanie points out, evilly. “You only ever use good grammar when you’re hiding something. So. What’s the deal with you and Writer-Boy?”

“Was that supposed to be subtle?”

“Nope,” Lanie grins. “You’ve been bottling up whatever you two idiots have done this time up for nearly two months, and the whole world c’n tell you’re miserable. So spill. Drink the vodka and
tell your Auntie Lanie.”


“You need help, girl. Lots and lots of help. So tell me what gives.”

Beckett downs her drink in one long mouthful and picks up the next. “You buying?” she asks.

“You paying?” Lanie bats back.

“Guess so.”

“How about you unpack that a little? What’s the story?”

Lanie executes a complicated wave-and-wiggle that attracts the eye of every male (and several females) in the bar, but most importantly gets the attention of a waitperson. Very swiftly after that, several drinks arrive, together with some food.

“I didn’t want food,” Beckett growls.

“You gotta eat. A hangover won’t improve tomorrow.”

Beckett growls some more. Nothing’s going to improve tomorrow, so she might as well blot out the entire memory of the last nearly two months and the unfortunate commentary of Timothy J. Selwyn, who had triggered a whole series of unfortunate memories of some ten years ago.

“C’mon, Kate. Stop growling and tell me what that jackass has done this time.”

Beckett knocks back half the second glass. “Men,” she says with deep loathing, “are a bunch of dumbass, shitheaded assholes.”

Lanie blinks. It’s not Kate’s style to talk like that. “Okayyyyyy,” she says slowly. “Don’t pull your punches, girl. Tell me what you really think.”

“They’re all assholes,” she says again, with venom, and bites sharply through a handful of fries.

Lanie pats her hand, rather tentatively. “How about you unpack that a little? What’s the story?”

“There was that detective out of Robbery. Demming.”

“Mm? He looked quite cute. If you don’t want him, I’ll have him.”

“Take him. He’s a sexist dumbass.”

“Uh?”

“Asked me on a date.”
“Yeah? That’s not sexist, last I heard.”

“Asked Castle for permission.”

Lanie’s mouthful of iced tea hits the table. “He did what?” She frantically mops up before it can dribble off on to her clothes. “And how do you know this anyway?”

“I heard them. Demming asked Castle if there was anything going on between him and me.” She pauses, and gulps down another large slug of vodka. “He just said no, like I was a stranger and he couldn’t believe Demming would ask. Then he told Demming there was no flag on the play.” She sniffs. “Ever since my apartment blew up he’s been acting like he barely knows me.”

“I thought he’d been flirting just like usual,” Lanie says, frantically trying to process the last ten minutes or so.

“He’d do it with any pretty woman he saw. Scratch that. He’d do it with anything female including a stray dog. Or a rat.”

“So Demming asked Castle if he minded if he dated you? And Castle said no?” Lanie doesn’t believe this, except that Kate’s eyes are damp and the vodka level is dropping faster than Niagara Falls.

“Yeah.”

There is a long, contemplative, pause.

“Well, I won’t be asking for Detective Demming from Santa,” Lanie eventually says. “What a jerk.”

“Too right. Asshole,” Kate repeats bitterly.

“Kate,” Lanie says very seriously, “what happened with you staying with Castle after your apartment blew up? I thought he’d asked you to stay.”

“Yeah. Right up till I found out I didn’t fit in, about ten seconds after I walked in the door. None of them wanted me there. Even Castle was avoiding me. So I found the new place and left.” She sniffs, and takes another drink. “He should never have offered. He didn’t want me there, and ever since he’s barely spoken to me. I thought,” she says, tongue loosened by vodka, “he was offering because… because he actually felt something. Instead he was just sorry for me, and then he realised he’d made a mistake.”

“I don’t get it,” Lanie says. “He came into a blown up building after you. How’s that not feeling something?”

“Who knows? I don’t get it either. I thought he did. Anyway, he doesn’t care. He’s happy that someone else wants to date me.” She drinks again, and the dampness in her eyes spills out.

“Oh, Kate,” Lanie says softly, and pats her hand.

“Takes away the problem.” Her voice turns combative. “Well, I’m not mooning round after some jerk-off asshole who doesn’t want me. He can go swivel on a sharpened stick.” Lanie notices the s’s beginning to slur. Hardly surprising, since they’ve been here less than an hour and Kate’s downed two and a half doubles in that time. The rest of the third one’s disappearing pretty fast, too.

“Eat something,” Lanie orders, and shoves the dish of fries under Kate’s nose. Much to Lanie’s
surprise, she does. “D’you want me to put something in his coffee?”

“No. I just want him to leave. Sitting there playing like it’s just like it was, ‘cept he doesn’t mean any of it. ‘S just an act. ‘S all for *research.*” Her head drops. “He never cared at all.”
Who'd ever guess it?

It’s just as well Beckett had set her alarm for Saturday morning, because without that she wouldn’t have woken at all. As it is, her head hurts and she feels lousy, and it’s all her own fault for drinking that much vodka that fast. Advil, a scalding shower and two full pints of water later, she can contemplate the complexities of making coffee. She cannot contemplate the complexities of making her bed, as yet. If she bends over her head might fall off. Fortunately, she has just about achieved coffee-making for the second time around when her new couch is delivered.

Unfortunately, her phone rings at the same time as the men are heaving it through the door.

“Beckett,” she bites off.

“Beckett, ‘s Espo. Dispatch called. We got a body.”

“I need ten, then I’ll be on my way. Why us?”

“Another like Tuesday. Same place.”

“Later.”

She turns to the delivery men. “I gotta go. Just leave it there.” Right inside the door, where she’ll likely fall over it tonight when – if – she comes back. (Not home. It’s not a home.) She might stay at the precinct. It’s as comfortable as her apartment.

She signs the delivery docket and they leave. She’s halfway to the drawer where she keeps her shield and gun before the noise of the door closing has faded. About that point she realises that she’s not safe to drive, curses, not quietly, and skedaddles for the subway. At least that’s close. On the way, she takes the easy option and sends Castle a text. She’s too raw to speak to him. Not to mention too hungover to hide her feelings in a bland tone and calm words.

The motion of the subway and its clattering noise does nothing to improve Beckett’s hangover or her mood. However, the sight of the corpse (and, though she’s not admitting it, the absence of Castle) clears her head.

“It’s just like the last one,” Ryan says. “Look.”

It is. This time, the beaten-up corpse is African-American, but if Beckett looks below the bruising it’s another long-legged model type, wearing a skin-tight minidress.

“Lanie?” she says.

“Post mortem bruises, is my bet. I don’t know what killed her, yet. No obvious stab wounds. No bullet holes that I can see. I’ll need to take her back and open her up.”

“What’s your guess at time of death?”

“Sometime during last night.”

“Who’s dead? What’s happened?”

Well, from Beckett’s point of view, what’s happened is that a loud disaster is arriving on Track One. It hurts her head, which hurts quite enough already.
“Hey, Castle,” the boys say in tandem.

“Hey. Why didn’t you ring me, Beckett? I might have missed all the fun.”

“I was in the quiet carriage,” she says, completely untruthfully, since there is no such thing. Castle looks hurt. She doesn’t care. “And this is not fun. Have some respect for the victim.” Castle hunches. Ryan casts her a reproachful look.

“What else do we know?”

“Nuthin’,” Esposito answers. “CSU just got started. We don’t got nothing yet. No ID, no phone, nowhere to hide anythin’.”

“Okay. I’ll get started. You two set up the canvass, I’ll go start asking for camera footage. Lanie, will you get me prints or dental or something so I can run them through the databases?”

“Okay. I’ll do that first, then open her up.”

“Another gorgeous woman,” Castle says. “Same as last time.”

“Yeah.” Beckett starts moving in the direction of the Twelfth. Castle follows her. “There’s nothing for you to do,” she points out.

“Oh.”

“I’m going to do all the paperwork to get things moving.”

“Oh. I could help.”

“You hate paperwork.”

“For you, Beckett, I’d do paperwork.”

She simply stares at him, ramming down her fury at his behaviour. “Don’t be ridiculous,” she says sharply. “In a year of shadowing me you’ve never once done paperwork.”

“I could help,” Castle says mutinously.

“Save it for when we’ve got some evidence to work with. There’s nothing you can help with now. Go enjoy your weekend.”

Castle, once more, feels shut out. Sure, he never has done any paperwork, but that’s more than a hint to go home and leave Beckett alone. “Okay,” he replies irritably, and stalks off without so much as a farewell.

Castle’s general annoyance at being texted, rather than called; at being slapped down for absolutely no reason; at being brushed off, even though he hates paperwork; and most of all at being shut out when he’d wanted a chance for a proper discussion about what on earth is going on with Beckett and why she’s been behaving as if he’s in the wrong is spilling over. She’s the one who wouldn’t stay when he gave her a home and didn’t even tell him she was looking till she left, and she’s the one who’s not explaining anything and putting up barriers and running away and not being a partner.

He quite deliberately goes to Remy’s to get an early lunch, knowing that Beckett likes their food a lot and not in the slightest bit sorry that she isn’t there, and then salves his scathed feelings by spending a couple of hours in the New York Public Library. By the time he leaves for home, it’s
well after three, and he is somewhat calmer.

“Hey, Paige,” Castle says to his daughter’s best friend as he steps inside the loft. “Nice to see you.” Alexis trips down the stairs behind her.

“Hi, Mr Castle,” she says brightly. He’s really pleased to see Paige. Alexis had been so upset when they weren’t speaking, back when Beckett had briefly stayed. She’d wanted so much advice, and he’d been hurt for her, so he hadn’t stinted his time or support, no matter how much he’d wanted time with Beckett. His daughter always comes first.

“Glad to see you two have made up your differences,” he remarks.

“What differences?” Paige says.

Castle looks at Alexis, who is looking very conscious. “I must have misunderstood,” he says. “Wrong friend.” But he knows it wasn’t. He has an excellent memory for anything to do with Alexis.

“Oh no, Mr Castle. Everyone loves Lex. We’re all really tight.”

Castle hides his complete astoundment and confusion under his normal cool-dad persona.

“Lex, you coming?” Paige says, and further explains, “study group, you know? Lex is the mainstay.”

By now Alexis is refusing to look anywhere but at the floor. Her voice is tight and almost resentful as she says, “Sure, Paige. We’ll be late if we don’t go now.”

Castle regards his daughter’s rapidly departing back with a fair degree of irritation and befuddlement, rapidly resolving into one appalling conclusion: that she had lied to him about all those issues. He has no idea why she should have done that. She could tell him anything, so he had thought. He makes himself a mind clearing coffee and repairs to his study to think.

He has absolutely no idea why Alexis might have invented all sorts of untrue stories about friendship issues. She’d got no reason to. Unless… No. Surely not.

But it had been so very convenient, he suddenly thinks, that all those issues meant that he had never, not once, got a chance to talk to Beckett alone.

That can’t be right. Alexis had been really considerate of Beckett, never let her lift a finger, treated her absolutely like a guest should be treated, beautifully polite.

Oh. Polite. He thinks back. Polite is not at all the same as friendly, except he hadn’t seen that. And Beckett is not notably keen on being the recipient of constant favours without being able to reciprocate. Oh. They’d never let her do anything. Alexis had made sure she couldn’t do anything. In fact, Castle is fairly sure that Beckett had tried to cook, and even bought groceries – he knows this, because they always go to Whole Foods, and there had been a different bag in the fridge – to do so, and yet hadn’t. He’d assumed the groceries had been used anyway. Suddenly he’s not so sure. Certainly Beckett hadn’t been allowed to cook.

But nothing he can remember could have been deliberate… could it? They’d been being good hosts – hadn’t they? Well, he had. He’d been looking after her. Making sure Beckett needn’t worry about or do anything, especially when she was so busy at the precinct. But…. If Alexis had lied about all the issues that had needed his constant attention and help… everything suddenly takes on a very different complexion.
Castle hunches miserably in his chair, and grimly begins to examine the concept that Alexis had quite deliberately ensured not only that Beckett felt unwelcome, but that she had also blocked Beckett from having any private time with him, in the guise of being the perfect host.

At the end of some focused thinking, Castle is bleakly furious with his daughter and himself. His daughter had deliberately made Beckett feel completely shut out, and he hadn’t noticed a thing, because he always makes all the time for Alexis that she needs.

No wonder Beckett had left as soon as she could.

And just to put the cream cheese frosting and sprinkles on the top of that poisonous cake, he’d been so stunned by and then pissed at her unwillingness to stay that he’d said nothing at all so much as to question it, let alone object.

Oh, hell, what a mess. Because Beckett has put her walls up again because she’s damn sure he didn’t care she’d moved out. No wonder she’d been receptive to Demming. Demming had made it clear he wanted her company. He, Castle, surely had not.

But she’s not seeing Demming. She’d tossed him into the trash in no time flat. Presumably their first date – his teeth grind – hadn’t gone well. She’s seeing some oversized Bigfoot-mutant called O’Leary, instead. Castle dislikes him intensely, and he hasn’t even met him.

At which less-than-stellar moment the front door opens. Castle glances out of the study through the bookshelves, and discovers it to be his mother.

“Hello, darling,” she carols happily. “Isn’t it a wonderful day?”

Castle doesn’t think so, but he is intrigued. “How so?” he asks, theatrically.

“I have a part,” his mother enthuses. She frowns, briefly. “Of course, it’s only a stop-gap, but still, a part.”

“And what is this part?”

“Agatha Hannigan,” she admits. Castle, used to his mother winning far weirder parts than that (the role of Brad in a sex-reversed production of The Rocky Horror Picture Show was a particular highlight that no amount of brain scrubbing has managed to eliminate), does not snigger. He merely thinks about sniggering. Then he remembers his conclusions of the afternoon, and loses any and all desire to snigger.

“Mother,” he says heavily.

Martha looks worriedly at him. “Yes?”

“Mother, why didn’t you ever give me any time with Beckett when she was here?”

“I wanted to make her feel welcome, darling. I didn’t want her to feel she was pushing me out or making me uncomfortable. And… well, she is rather interesting to talk to. Such an unusual background for a detective. Why didn’t you say? I’d have found something to do – or someone to see for the evening” – Castle winces, and groans – “if I’d known you wanted a private chat.”

His mother’s sincerity is patent. One of Castle’s worries dies quietly and unmourned. Whatever Alexis had been doing, his mother had not been a part of it. She’s still talking.

“I mean, I won’t say I wasn’t just a little relieved when she found a new apartment so quickly, but I
was a bit ashamed of that. It was just… well… I didn’t want us to be blown up too. I know that’s silly and heartless but…”

“I get it, Mother. You are, despite your reputation, human.”

“My reputation?”

“As a star,” Castle says rather dryly.

“How sweet of you,” Martha replies, equally dryly. They smile wryly at each other. Martha returns to the point. “If she’d stayed longer, once that horrible man was arrested and there wasn’t any risk to the three of us, I’d have liked it.” She pauses. “Why hasn’t she come here since? Surely you haven’t upset her, Richard?”

“I think I might have, but I didn’t know it,” Castle admits.

“I’m sure if you just explained to her, she’d understand. After all, darling, you can be very charming when you want to be.”

“Beckett is immune to my so-called charm.”

“Nonsense. She just hides it better than the groupies at your parties. If you try just a little harder, I’m sure she’d come round.”

“Doubt it,” Castle mutters blackly.

“Oh? But every time she looked at you it was clear she felt something.”

“She’s met someone else.”

“What?” Martha emits. “Someone else?”

“Yeah. Some musclebound monster cop from another precinct.”

“Richard,” his mother says very firmly, “what exactly is going on between you and Katherine? When you brought her back here it really looked as if you two had reached some sort of common sense understanding.”

Martha walks over to her son and gently pushes him down on to the couch. He looks up at her rather piteously. “I don’t know, Mother. Ever since she moved out, she’s been avoiding anything that might be a conversation.”

“And you haven’t exactly tried hard either, have you? Don’t tell me,” she sighs, “you were hurt she moved out so fast and you were sulking, so you left her to it.” Castle nods, shamefacedly. “And she’s likely just as hurt that you didn’t seem to care, so she’s sulking too.” She sighs even more deeply. “What a pair. Now, why do you think you upset her but you didn’t know it? Normally it’s quite obvious when you’ve upset someone.”

“Because I didn’t realise why she found a new apartment so fast.”

“Mmm?”

Castle remembers his anger, and sits up straight from his slump, eyes hard. “Alexis deliberately shut Beckett out. I found out today that all those friendship issues she needed help with were complete crap. Paige let it slip. She was making sure Beckett didn’t have any time with me. So I thought about all Alexis’s behaviour while Beckett was here and Alexis never let her help. I
thought” – he spits out – “that Alexis was really behaving well. Instead she was making sure that Beckett felt really, really uncomfortable and unwanted. So Beckett moved out, as fast as she could…”

“Oh,” Martha says faintly. “Oh my. Oh dear.”

Castle does not think that oh dear really covers the enormity of Alexis’s behaviour.

“What on earth are you going to do?”

“I don’t know. I just don’t know.”

“Well, I know one thing.”

“Yes, Mother?”

“A nice glass of wine will help everything.” She bustles off to select a bottle and pour two large glasses. “Now, what are we going to do about Alexis?”

“We are going to do nothing. I am going to deal with my child’s behaviour.”

Not very much later, Castle’s phone chimes with a text from Alexis. Sleepover @ Paige’s 2nite. CU. A x. Quite apart from the appalling teen text-speak, which he loathes, Castle instantly recognises an attempt to evade any or all of him, the questions to which he requires answers, and the consequences of Alexis’s behaviour. He is deeply disappointed in her.

He is utterly infuriated when his call to Alexis goes straight to voicemail. He dials again: this time, Paige’s mother.

“Hey, Lena. Rick here. Look, I know Paige invited Alexis to sleep over tonight, but Alexis must’ve forgotten that we’re having dinner with her grandmother.” Martha, reappearing, blinks. Castle continues to lie smoothly down the phone. “I don’t want to put you to any trouble, so I’ll send the car service to pick her up. It’s a little awkward to get there.”

It will surely be awkward to get Alexis back to the loft. Castle expects the evening to become extremely awkward very shortly.

“Thanks, Lena.”

He calls his car service, gives them a few brief instructions, and then waits. Very shortly his phone rings.

“What are you doing?” Alexis emits. “There’s no dinner with Grams.”

“You are coming home. We need to have a very serious talk.”

“I won’t. I’m staying here. You can’t just override my invitations like this.”

“Why not?” Castle asks in a tone of silky menace which he has never previously applied to Alexis. “You did exactly that to mine.”

There is a nasty, stunned silence, followed by, “I don’t know what you mean.” But it’s pathetically unconvincing.

“You know precisely what I mean, Alexis. We’ll be discussing this at home. You can get in the car, or I can tell Paige’s mother why you’re being grounded.”
He cuts the call, still annoyed. Martha has the good sense and tact not to comment; simply refilling his wine glass.

“Well, darling, that was certainly laying down the law,” Martha notes, safely after Castle’s had a large slug of his wine.

“About damn time,” Castle grunts.

“I’m not disagreeing with you, Richard,” Martha says tartly. “If Alexis really did make Katherine unwelcome deliberately, then of course you have to deal with that.” She sips her wine as formally as a duchess might do. “I’m merely surprised. You usually don’t.”

“Usually,” Castle replies with a burning acid emphasis, “I don’t need to. Usually Alexis behaves impeccably. Most of the reason I didn’t work out what was going on is because she’s always been so well-behaved and mature.” He gulps another mouthful of wine.

“I didn’t see it,” he says, almost to himself, “so Beckett up and left, rather than fight it out, and it’s all gone wrong ever since.”

Martha looks sympathetically at her son’s bent head. Her words, however, are not sympathetic at all. “So stop moping and talk to the girl. You’ve been miserable for over a month because both of you are too dumb to talk to each other and whatever her reasons are for not talking, you were too scared to call her behaviour out. Well, now you know she had a pretty good reason. I wouldn’t have stuck around either. So do something.”

“She’s found someone else,” Castle says flatly.

“So you’re too much of a coward to explain?” Martha’s stinging tone brings Castle’s head up, his eyes blazing. She rolls right over his opening splutter. “If I were her, and you’d made it clear you weren’t bothered she’d left, I’d try to move on too.”

“She won’t…” Castle starts, then stops, takes a breath and starts again. “It’s like talking to a wall. I’d get more response from the wall.”

“Oh?” Martha encourages.

“Perfectly polite, perfectly reasonable about anything to do with the cases, and about as much emotion as a brick.”

“Really, darling?”

“Yeah. Totally uninterested.”

“Nonsense,” Martha states very firmly. “Have I taught you nothing?”

“Uh?”

“She’s definitely still interested.”

“Mother, that’s” –

“If she truly didn’t care, she’d treat you just like she did last year. If she was happy, she wouldn’t be blocking you off like this. Darling, the girl can’t bear to expose her feelings because she’s utterly miserable. You say she doesn’t care. Hasn’t it entered your rock-solid head that she thinks you don’t care?”
Castle makes a rather incoherent *glurp* noise. It’s taken his mother ten minutes to spot what’s taken him six weeks to work out. He’d only today managed to realise that Beckett was hiding her feelings, so dulled by his own woes and hurt that he couldn’t see past it. He’d simply thought she’d – well, truthfully, he’d been so pissed with her for moving out without more than a chilly thank you and then completely backing off that he hadn’t initially bothered to wonder why any of it had originally occurred. And then it had been too late to try.

He *knows*, too, that Beckett’s instant, automatic, hard-wired reaction to anything that upsets or hurts her is to run away – physically and emotionally: both of which she’s displayed in spades this time round. What she never, ever, does is talk about it. He supposes, bleakly, that she’s just going along with what she thinks he wanted.

Oh, fuck, what a mess they’ve managed this time. One thing, however, is absolutely for sure clear. His daughter is the main reason for the initial disaster, and *that* needs to be dealt with, right now. He turns to his mother, and hugs her. “I’ll try to talk to Beckett,” he says. “Thanks, Mother.” More is in his tone than the mere words.

“Go get her, darling. Just leave me the wine.” His mother swipes the bottle from under his nose, and swishes upstairs in a cloud of matriarchal satisfaction.
Quite some several moments later, the front door opens and a red-haired tempest storms in.

“How could you, Dad? You ruined my plans and made me look dumb. You can’t just order me around and lie to my friends’ moms! You’re totally unfair!”

“Actually, I can,” Castle points out calmly. “Since you pulled exactly that same trick on me. Now sit down. We need to talk.”

“No! I’m going to my room.”

Castle stands, takes the two long strides necessary, and removes Alexis’s phone from her hand.

“Go into my office and sit down. We need to have a very serious discussion about unacceptable behaviour.”

“Give me my phone back!” Alexis shrieks at him.

“Alexis,” Castle emits with icy anger, “let’s get one thing straight right now. I’m the parent, and right now the only thing you need to understand is that I’m in charge here. You don’t seem to get that you’re in real trouble, and the only thing that’s going to change is how long I ground you for.”

Alexis looks blankly at him. “You can’t! You’re being totally unreasonable.”

“Get in there and sit down,” Castle commands. It appears to dawn on Alexis that he really means what he says, and that he is completely furious with her. The concept that she is in far deeper trouble than she has ever been, or that she has anticipated, slowly registers. She does as she is told, reluctantly.

“Now,” Castle says heavily, seated judicially behind his desk, “why don’t you start by explaining why you consistently lied to me about issues at school so that I was concentrating on you all the time Detective Beckett was here?”

Answer comes there none.

“Okay, why did you deliberately make her feel unwelcome?”

He is unsurprised, but even more disappointed, by her answer.

“I’m sorry, Dad,” she says insincerely. “I didn’t realise she’d feel like that.”

“Don’t lie to me, Alexis,” Castle raps out. “You’ve done enough of that already. I want to know exactly why you did all of it. I’d never have believed you would be so unkind.”

Still she says nothing, defiance on her face and in her posture.

“Right. I’m going to tell you what I think you’ve done, since you don’t seem to see a problem with any of this.” He takes a cold, slow breath. “Detective Beckett’s apartment was blown up with her inside it. She was damn lucky to get out of there at all, never mind mostly unhurt. She lost everything she owned except her watch and ring.” Alexis doesn’t blink or move. “So I invited my friend – that would be Detective Beckett, just so you’re clear about what I’m saying – to stay here until she could fix things properly.” He looks frigidly at his daughter. “What did you say earlier? Oh, yes,” he says sarcastically. “You said You can’t just override my invitations. You, however,
did exactly that. You had no right whatsoever to do that, but it didn’t stop you. You made it really clear to Detective Beckett that she wasn’t welcome.”

He pauses, but Alexis is both unreceptive and unresponsive. Her face is pale, but set.

“How about you explain to me what happened each time she tried to help?”

Finally Alexis speaks, but it’s not acceptance. “You always say that guests, like, totally shouldn’t have to lift a finger. Now you’re complaining that I did everything so she didn’t have to?” She stares mutinously back at him.

“You don’t get to have that both ways. If Detective Beckett was a guest – my guest – then yeah, she shouldn’t have been made to lift a finger, but you should have let me have time to talk to her on my own – and don’t think we’re not going to talk about your lying, either. We’ll get to that – and if she wasn’t a guest, then you should have taken up her offers of help. And just on that subject,” he says freezingly, “what really happened with those groceries she bought?” He waits, in vain. “I know I didn’t throw them in the trash. I also know that she never got given the chance to cook. So did she ditch them, or did you?”

“You never let anyone else cook.” Which is not an answer.

“You didn’t ask me whether I would have,” Castle points out. “Nor did you give Beckett a chance to ask me, either. So who put it all in the trash?”

“It wasn’t organic,” Alexis says defiantly. “We only ever cook organic.”

Castle stares at her, horrified. “You put perfectly edible food in the trash because it wasn’t organic? Seriously? Or was wasting food just another way to make her feel totally out of place? Or did you dump it because she might have done something that I would have appreciated and you wanted to make sure she never got a chance to do that?”

More angry, tempestuous silence.

“Okay. Let’s go back to all those lies. You pretended that you had all sorts of issues at school and with your friends, which took up all my time. In fact, they took up so much time that I never got a moment to talk to Detective Beckett, and she spent all her time keeping out the way so that you could talk to me privately. You knew I’d never brush you off, and I bet you knew that she wouldn’t interfere, and you manipulated both of us so that she was totally shut out. Why?”

Still no answers. Alexis is white, but as obdurate as when Castle began. He estimates that she’s said less than twenty words from the time they entered his office, and he still hasn’t a clue why she behaved in this way.

“Okay. So you still don’t seem to get it. Let’s put it really simply. You shut out Detective Beckett and made her feel so unwelcome that she started apartment-hunting practically the day after she got here – while the guy who blew her apartment up and was trying to kill her was still out there. You put her in direct danger. If the killer had caught up with her while she was out looking for a new place because she didn’t feel she could stay here – because of your behaviour – well, it’s just dumb luck that he didn’t.”

Castle looks very, very straightly at Alexis. “I really hope that you hadn’t ever thought of that, rather than that you just didn’t care.”

For the first time, she flinches. Castle is wholly relieved. She hadn’t thought of that.
“I guess you’re not explaining anything because you really were deliberately trying to drive her out and making sure she had no chance to talk to me, just in case we worked out what was going on. I guess you wouldn’t want to have to admit to acting in such a spiteful and dishonest way. I can’t believe that you did it. I can’t believe that you manipulated me like that. I’ve never been so disappointed by you in all your life.”

Alexis jerks in her seat as if he’d struck her.

“This is how it’s going to be. You’re grounded indefinitely, and that won’t change until I’ve had a proper explanation from you about why you did this. You’ll come home straight after school. No study groups. No sleepovers. I’m confiscating your phone, and your allowance is withdrawn apart from lunch money.” Castle pauses, utterly furious and only just succeeding in controlling his feelings. “I’ll get to explain to Detective Beckett how you made a fool out of me, which won’t go down well. I’m pretty sure she won’t be impressed by you. If she bothers listening, I’m certain she’s not going to forgive this in a hurry. It’s going to take a long time for me to trust you again, too.”

She’s white-faced.

“You owe me, but especially Detective Beckett, an apology, but I don’t guess from this conversation that you’re going to do that. Go to your room.”

“Grams won’t let you” – Alexis starts, furiously.

“Grams agrees that your behaviour is out of line, but it’s not up to her. It’s up to me. You can’t play us off. Don’t try.”

She dashes out unceremoniously, trailing furious tears. Castle looks bleakly at the slammed-shut door, and then at his watch. It’s only slightly after seven. Suddenly, he wants to deal with the other half of this catastrophically fucked-up mess.

He locks Alexis’s phone away, vacates his study, briefly attends upon his mother to apprise her of the situation and ensure that she doesn’t provide Alexis with sympathy or money, neither of which, it transpires, she was planning on doing. It seems his mother is almost as appalled as he is. That done, he leaves to seek out Beckett’s new apartment.

The apartment is in a pleasant, unspectacular area high up on the Upper West Side, some considerable way from both the Twelfth Precinct and Castle’s loft. Her previous place, he recalls, had been very much closer: convenient for theory building and occasional late night takeout and coffee. It’s utterly ridiculous, because he knows she’d simply taken what she could get, but he can’t help feeling that it’s a deliberate distancing of herself.

He goes up – no doorman, but at least there’s an elevator – and finds himself facing an anonymous, blandly uninviting wooden door. There is no name, only a small, unobtrusive number, difficult to pick out in the ill-lit hallway. He rings the doorbell, and waits.

The door opens. Castle, expecting either Beckett or no answer at all, is entirely blindsided to find himself staring at the sternum of a chest that’s wider than Montana. He looks up. And up. This must be the monster-Bigfoot O’Leary to whom Esposito had referred. He hadn’t exaggerated. He is huge. Castle, no small man himself, has never met anyone this large, ever. He is not used to feeling undersized, and it does not improve his mood.

“Yeah?” reverberates around the hall, emanating from an elephantine mouth, below a pair of cop-neutral blue eyes in a pleasant, if sizeable, face, topped by a rather intimidating buzz cut.
“I wanted to see Beckett.”

Castle doesn’t introduce himself or explain. Finding Beckett’s mountainous companion actually in her apartment, opening her door as if he had some right to do so, has wrenched his gut. He is not inclined to play nice.


Castle gasps, gut-punched. He’d hoped. Looks like that was hopeless.

“Give me a sec. Who is it?” drifts round the door.

O’Leary regards Castle with a quizzically assessing expression. “Dunno,” he drawls. “Iffen I had to guess, I’d guess it was that writer of yours. Din’t introduce hiself.”

“Castle?! Beckett yelps. “What’s he doing here?”

“Dunno. Sh’ll I let him in?”

“O’Leary,” Beckett says with a very familiar tone of exasperation, “we’ve talked about this. Remember? You don’t leave guests standing on the doorstep while you interrogate them. It’s not polite. You can throw them out later if they’re not wanted.” O’Leary squirms. “Now, let him in like you should have done as soon as you opened my door.”

“But you asked me to open the door,” the mountain complains plaintively.

“Yeah, but I didn’t ask you to turn into a gatekeeper. Have you let him in yet?”

O’Leary begrudgingly moves aside, and Castle enters, closing the door behind him.

“I’m O’Leary,” the Titan rumbles, unnecessarily. There could only be one cop-friend-monster of Beckett’s who’s that size. “Central Park Precinct. Guess you’re Castle.” There isn’t much warmth in that statement.

“Yeah.”

Neither man extends a hand. Tentative hostility seeps into the air.

Castle takes his eyes off O’Leary and gazes around. The apartment is not so much Spartan as empty. There is a couch, a desk and a chair. Through a door the footpost of a bed is visible. There are no pictures, photos or side tables on which to put them. There are no blinds or curtains. There is, in fact, no decoration. It’s bleak; barely appearing occupied. It’s been almost two months and she might have moved in yesterday for all the furniture there is. It abruptly occurs to him that she’d have had to pay rent and a deposit, and that she’d had at most two paycheques since the explosion, to meet all that, new clothes, and the essentials. It hadn’t occurred to him that funds might be tight till the insurance came through.

While he’s been glancing round, O’Leary has disposed his huge bulk on the couch and is observing Castle as keenly as Castle is observing the apartment.

“So you’re the shadow,” he says, flatly. His words do not convey nice to meet you.

Castle looks round at him. “So you’re O’Leary,” he says in the same flat tone.

“You ain’t what I expected. Then again, I din’t expect you’d be knockin’ on Beckett’s door.”
“I’m her partner,” Castle asserts, stung by the tone.

“Really?” drawls O’Leary. “Coulda fooled me. Way I heard it, you ain’t nothin’ but researchin’.”

“You heard it wrong, then.”

At which utterly inauspicious moment Beckett walks out of her room, rubbing the damp ends of her hair with a towel and clearly having just finished a shower. She looks at the two men squaring up to each other, crosses the room without acknowledging either and puts the kettle on in the small kitchenette area.

“If you’re going to fight, go outside,” she says tiredly. “I don’t need to listen to either of you sizing up whose is bigger.” She automatically makes herself a mug of coffee, and doesn’t offer one to either man. Castle notices a used mug on the side, and attributes it, quite correctly, to O’Leary.

“I came to talk to you,” Castle says, ignoring O’Leary, who ignores him right back.

“Yeah? Couldn’t you have talked to me in the precinct?”


“What is it?” she says, more neutrally.

“Privately.”

Beckett raises an eyebrow. There is a short, uncomfortable silence. O’Leary makes the same chiding, rumbling noise he had a moment ago, still directed at Beckett.

“O’Leary,” she says, and flicks her eyes to the door.

“Guess that’s my cue,” he says in a deep bass, and unfolds to standing. Beckett walks wide round Castle to the door. Under Castle’s unhappy, jealous eye, O’Leary wraps her into a brief hug.

“Seeya, Beckett,” he says, whispers something, and departs. Castle’s conviction that O’Leary is dating Beckett is cemented.

Beckett returns to the kitchenette to retrieve her coffee, as Castle stays standing in the centre of the room. It appears to occur to her that he has no coffee.

“Do you want a drink?” she asks, finally, neutrally, as if she’d had to force herself to hospitality.

Beckett, bored of staring at the walls on her own, again, and without any reasonable excuse for staying in the precinct, had taken herself for a long hard run in Central Park in the hope that it would finish the hangover cure that copious Advil had begun, ended up at the precinct there, not entirely accidentally, and had prevailed upon O’Leary to help her move her new couch around till she was happy with its location.

“Didn’t you think about asking your writer to help?” O’Leary asks. “Thought you were lookin’ for a way to get back to normal.”

She could have said that it had never crossed her mind to ask Castle to help. She could have. She would have been lying through her teeth, of course, but she could have said it.

“Get back to civil. I told you, he’s not interested.” She swallows a sob. “Anyway, you’re bigger.”
“No flirtin’, Beckett. Pete don’t like it when you flirt with me.”

“That’s ‘cause I don’t flirt with him too,” she manages. “Let’s see what this looks like over there, across from the window.”

“Beckett,” O’Leary says gently, “stop tryin’ to fool me. You been mis’rable for weeks. Whyn’t you just talk to him?”

“He doesn’t want to talk to me. I told you that. He’s not interested. Well. He’s not interested in a cop. He got interested again as soon as Espo let slip I’d done a bit of modelling. He’s all about the looks.”

“I don’t believe that,” O’Leary drawls. “Man runs into an explodin’ buildin’ after you, it’s about more than good looks.”

“That’s what I thought,” Beckett replies bitterly. She swallows, and maintains absolute control. “Guess we’re both wrong.”

She straightens up and looks at the lonely couch. It’s in a good enough place, for now. Just like everything else is in good enough places. She hasn’t enough furniture to worry about accurate placements. Her desk is in the right place, under a window. Almost all her books were destroyed, so she doesn’t need to worry about bookshelves. The remains are in a little pile on the floor.

“Y’know, I’d like to meet this Castle.”

“Be my guest. Come around the Twelfth, and you can’t miss him.”

“C’mere, butterfly,” O’Leary says, which would get any other of Beckett’s colleagues shot and the corpse dissolved in acid. He pats her on the shoulder. “You gotta try to talk to him. Least lay it out there. If he still ain’t bothered, his loss.”

She shifts out of reach, and shifts the subject.

“Do you want a coffee?” she asks. “I’ll get takeout if you’re hungry.”

“Ain’t you hungry?”

“Not yet.”

O’Leary doesn’t challenge that. Beckett isn’t obviously thinner, just…sharper-edged. And not yet is far better than no.

“Yeah, I’ll have a mug. Thanks.”

Beckett makes O’Leary’s coffee.

“Ain’t you havin’ one too?”

“I want a shower. I ran, and then we shifted furniture. Do you mind if I go wash, and then maybe I’ll feel more like eating.”

“‘Kay. I’ll mind the store for a few minutes. Maybe I’ll shift the couch a bit, iffen I don’t like where you’ve put it. Practice my interior design skills.”

Beckett manages a snort, which O’Leary hears with some relief.
“You leave it be, O’Leary. We’ve got it right. Just don’t break it, okay? I can’t afford two in one week.”

O’Leary is meditatively drinking his coffee and regarding the bleak expanse of bare brick walls, pierced only by unadorned, tall windows, when the doorbell rings. The shower is still running. He ambles over to the part-opened bedroom door, looks in, and calls through.

“Beckett, someone at the door. Want me to get it?”

The shower switches off. “Yeah. I’ll be a couple of minutes.”

O’Leary guesses that it’ll be that miniature spitfire ME Parrish. It’s not likely to be Beckett’s team, he doesn’t think. She’d said that she’d told them she’d invite them all over when she’d got enough chairs for them all to sit on, and he’s pretty sure that they wouldn’t cross her on that. Not if they’ve any sense, anyways. He ambles from bedroom door to front door, and opens it, incidentally blocking the way.

O’Leary has not at any stage informed Beckett that he’s actually quite fond of Richard Castle’s books. Somehow there’s never been an opportunity. When he opens the door, therefore, he is instantly sure of the identity of the visitor. Not being half the hayseed he pretends to be, either, he recognises the expression flashing across Castle’s face as furious, hurting, jealousy. And being Beckett’s oldest NYPD pal, and being possessed of both a rather evil sense of humour and a persistent feeling that Beckett should hear her shadow out since there is undoubtedly far more to this than she has learned to date, he doesn’t disabuse Castle of his instant assumption. Instead, he fuels it, and from Castle’s reactions, learns everything that he, O’Leary, needs to know.

Castle is about as uninterested in Beckett as a starving wolf would be in raw elk, O’Leary concludes. Therefore, he should help things along a little bit. Not necessarily tonight, but the next time he has some spare time, he might just drop by the Twelfth and have a little chat with Castle. Man to man.

Beckett, on the other hand, and not for the first time in O’Leary’s experience, has completely missed the tells. O’Leary wonders how she can be so particularly dumb, and then notices that all Castle’s reactions to his presence have been pulled back and shut down too. Two idiot peas in a stupid pod, O’Leary concludes, and makes to leave on Beckett’s request.

At the door, he provides Beckett with a brief hug, and a quiet whisper of, “Hear him out, huh?”
Learn to go it alone

Beckett has no idea why Castle should have bothered showing up – in fact, she’s surprised he even knows her address. It’s not as if they’ve talked about it. Now he says he’s come over so they can talk? She can’t see what there is to say: there’s been nothing to say for a month and more. Still, she can listen, she supposes. If she must.

She picks up her coffee, looks at Castle standing uselessly in the centre of the floor, no doubt, from his unprecedented lack of commentary, observing all the ways in which her apartment doesn’t measure up to his loft, and determines with some reluctance that she will not be as inhospitable as his home had proved to be. She forces her voice to cool neutrality rather than allowing her misery to show. This would not have been how she’d have preferred Castle to see her new space.

She’d have preferred that he never saw it at all, rather than this armed neutrality over the graveyard of her stupid, silly hopes.

“Do you want a drink?” she asks.

“Please,” Castle says, as unemotional as her words.

Beckett turns away to brew the coffee. Behind her, as she holds her shoulders firm and back straight, she can hear Castle’s familiar tread prowling her space. The footsteps pause, and then restart, more slowly. By the time she’s turned around he’s much closer to the kitchenette than she’d realised or indeed wanted. Up close, the faint scent of cologne and Castle’s ever-present personality are rather too intrusive.

She steps away from the counter and into the space where, at some point, she’ll put a dinner table. Castle is still gazing round, with far too much realisation on his face. Finally he moves from the counter, goes towards the couch, searches for somewhere to set down his coffee cup which isn’t the floor and fails to find anything.

“Don’t you even have a side table?” he blurts out.

Beckett only just clamps her mouth shut on an instant response of we’re not all millionaires.

“Haven’t seen any I like, yet,” she replies temperately. Castle appears to be entirely unconvinced.

“You said you wanted to talk,” she diverts. Unfortunately, it doesn’t work.

“You’ve barely got anything. Why didn’t you tell me?” Hurt anger is rising in his voice. He’s got no right to be hurt or angry, and Beckett’s own temper rises in its turn. “I’d have” –

“What? Lent me something?” she bites. “No thanks. I wouldn’t want to impose. I don’t need your charity.”

“I’d at least have got you a coffee table,” Castle snaps straight back. “As a housewarming gift. If you’d ever bothered to invite me.”

“You haven’t missed anything,” she fires out. “There hasn’t been a housewarming party, so you haven’t missed it. Your social status is intact.”

“That’s not what I mean and you know it.”
“Oh?”

“You can’t live like this.”

“I’d rather be here than be” – she stops hard, and regroups. “This whole discussion is pointless. I’m here and I’m happy with it.”

“Happy playing house with your boyfriend?” Castle rips, unforgivably. Seeing the unmade bed has torn him apart.

Beckett ignores that. It’s none of his business who she is – or isn’t – seeing. He said he didn’t care, so she’s not going to give him the satisfaction of knowing there’s nobody.

“At least I know who I can rely on. My friends might not have big Soho lofts but when they offer help they mean it.”

Castle stops in his infuriated tracks, punched point-perfect in his gut.

“I did mean it,” he says heavily. “That’s why I came to talk to you.”

“You meant it,” Beckett, still herself furious, picks him up, disbelievingly cynical and cold. “Sure you did. Right up till you realised I’d actually be there in your expensive millionaire’s loft disrupting your perfect, elegant little family with my uncouth cop attitudes and manners. Sorry, we don’t learn etiquette at the Academy.”

“Stop it!” Castle yells. “Just stop it and listen to me.”

“Why? As soon as I walked in it was clear it was a mistake. Different worlds. Go back to your perfect life in your rich-man bubble. Surely you get enough reality slumming it at the Twelfth.”

“The only mistake I made was not hauling you into my bedroom there and then.”

“More slumming? Or have you only decided that since you found out I was a model? Do I fit your type now? Good enough eye-candy?”

She stops, again, forcibly damming the bitter tide of hard words and harsher pain, and turns away.

“I’m happy here,” she says quietly, and drinks her coffee, staring out of the window.

“You can’t possibly be,” Castle grates, in the teeth of all evidence that she and her boyfriend are tearing up the sheets.

“It’s a damn sight better than I was in your loft,” she snaps back. “Go home. I don’t need this.”

“Will you shut up and listen to me? Stop starting a fight. I didn’t come here to have a fight. I wanted you to stay,” he yells.

Beckett notes the past tense.

The chill, sceptical silence that greets his words does not, to Castle, indicate receptivity or belief.

“I found out today that Alexis was deliberately making you so uncomfortable you’d leave,” he forces out. There’s no other way to do this. She won’t listen. She’s so bitter and angry, she doesn’t care. His mother was wrong. It’s not that she cares about him: it’s that Alexis has made her feel inferior. Shamed her, for not being one of them. Nothing to do with caring at all. She’d only let him hold her hand, after the explosion, after Montgomery’s diktat that she stay with him, because she’d
been shocked. It meant nothing. Nothing at all.

His words weigh heavily on the stagnant air between them. Beckett says nothing, her shoulder still angled to him, her eyes still on the Manhattan street outside the window, far below. The dam breached, Castle’s words flood out.

“I didn’t know she was lying about all the issues she had that needed me. She was making sure I had no time to talk to you. She knew you wouldn’t intrude on us.”

Beckett emits a very small sound.

“And then she deliberately acted in a way to make you uncomfortable and unwelcome, and because there was no chance to talk to you, we couldn’t fix it.”

She stands there, silhouetted against the fading evening light, turned around, but face in shadow.

“I apologise for my daughter’s behaviour,” he says formally. “I haven’t any idea why she did it. I only wish you’d told me why you moved out so fast.”

“You didn’t ask why I went. I was in the way. So I went. Better that way. I don’t fit.”

Castle sighs. “You weren’t in the way. Alexis lied and manipulated both of us into making it look like that, but it wasn’t true.”

“Oh.”

“I didn’t know why you’d gone, okay?” I thought” – he stops. He can’t find a good way to say I felt rejected so I wasn’t going to ask, in case it was true without it sounding perilously close to pathetically needy. “I thought that was what you wanted,” he says instead. “You didn’t want to stay. I was just, well, surprised by that. I didn’t know what was really going on, okay? I’d never have condoned it.”

“I believe that,” Beckett says, slowly. “You wouldn’t have allowed it.” Which words, Castle notes, are not the same as saying you would never have agreed with it. “Anyway, it’s all water under the bridge now. I’m here. It’s all worked out for the best.”

He can’t see her face at all, until she moves to switch the overhead light on. No side lamps, he notes. Her face is calm and clear; her posture relaxed. She sits down.

“I’m sorry for yelling at you,” she says. “It was wrong. Thank you for telling me the truth. None of it was down to you.”

Beckett apologising? Beckett apologising to him? For yelling at him? The world has surely ended.

“I thought… well, I didn’t realise what was happening.”

“How should you?” Castle says bitterly. “I didn’t. It never occurred to me that it was all fake.”

He comes to sit by her, but leaves a space. Truth told or not, she’s not emitting any warmth, and he doesn’t poach on other people’s preserves. (although maybe if he’d done some poaching before Demming nipped in he wouldn’t be worrying about any other people’s preserves) She’s got a boyfriend, and that’s that. He wants to reach for her hand, but he’s lost that chance. Silence, less hostile, stretches out while they both drink the remains of their tepid coffee.

“Friends again?” Castle says hopefully. It’s not what he wants, but it looks like it’s the best he’ll
“Yeah. Friends,” Beckett agrees. She preserves perfect friendliness as Castle drains his coffee and
leaves.

So, she thinks, as the door closes and she starts the washing up, after which she’ll go and make the
bed she’d left undone first thing this morning. *Friends.* That’s all he wants. Well, she knew that
already, so why does she keep torturing herself? He’d *wanted* – past tense – her to stay. Then. He
*should have* – more past tense – taken her to bed. All past tense. Whatever he’d just said, he hasn’t
denied that it wouldn’t have worked. No wonder he’d given Demming the go-ahead. Different
worlds. He clearly thought Demming would be more like her world.


It never occurs to Beckett that Castle could have thought that she’s dating O‘Leary. His gayness is
such a long-standing part of their friendship that she neither thinks about it nor mentions it. She
therefore has absolutely no idea that Castle doesn’t know about it.

So, Castle thinks, as he trudges out of Beckett’s new building, now he knows. O‘Leary’s her new
boyfriend. He’d seen the messy bed, the dropped towels. That’s that, then. So much for his
mother’s optimism. He still doesn’t know why Alexis did what she did, but she’s quite
comprehensively ruined any chance he’d ever had to win Beckett.

Friends, he muses bitterly. Just good friends. He aims for home wrapped in a pitch-black fog of
misery and anger.

“Are you all right, darling?” his mother asks, clearly reading his mood before he’s even spoken.

“Fine,” he lies blackly.

“Pish-tush. Didn’t it go well?”

“No, Mother, it did *not* go well. And I don’t want to discuss it. Beckett’s new boyfriend was there.
Okay?”

His mother acquires a concerned frown, but most fortunately doesn’t say anything. Castle is not in
the mood to suffer sympathy.

He is even less in the mood for a tantrumming teenager thundering down the stairs.

“You have to give me my phone back!”

Castle’s much tried temper ignites in a way that he has never experienced with Alexis.

“No, I don’t. You decided to make Detective Beckett feel unwelcome, unwanted and, I’ve found
out, socially inferior – which is total nonsense. Well, you’re going to find out what it’s like when
you can’t be part of the group. You won’t be getting your phone back, and you won’t have
computer access after eight-thirty any night, so you’d better make sure any computer-based
homework is done by then because I won’t be writing you any exemptions. If you’re not back from
school when you should be, I’ll come and pick you up, and if I have to do that I’ll be explaining
why to everyone present wherever you are. Your violin lessons will be here. You are *grounded*
until you have explained, understood and apologised *sincerely.*”

Alexis is silenced. His mother says nothing, for a moment.
“Do I understand correctly, Richard, that Alexis deliberately made Katherine feel as if we were too good for her?” she says in frigid tones.

“Yes.”

The atmosphere in the pleasantly warm loft turns Arctic in a heartbeat.

“So Katherine wasn’t good enough for you, Alexis?” Martha emits. “Have you forgotten everything I told you about my past? If you think Katherine isn’t good enough to stay with this family, then you surely can’t think I am. At twenty she was at college. At that age I was pregnant and verging on destitute. I didn’t even have the excuse of being blown up for having nothing. I guess under your views your father shouldn’t have taken me in when I needed help either, since I wouldn’t have fit into your private-school rich kid world.” She stands. “I was in Katherine’s place, once. Homeless, and relying on your father. Your behaviour would have had me staying on the streets. I support everything your father has just said. I can’t believe you would behave like this. You owe everyone an apology. I don’t want to speak to you again until then.” She stalks away, as regally furious as any queen from mediaeval times.

Castle thuds up the stairs, removes Alexis’s laptop, returns to his study, pours a drink and slugs it back in one go. In the space of a week, his whole life has fallen apart.

No-one calls him on Sunday. Early on Monday, his loft still thick with hostility, he spends two hours in the gym thumping the living daylights out of a heavy bag, and then sets off to the Twelfth.

When he gets there, the murder board is not extensively covered with information. Beckett’s face is extensively covered with frustration, however. In line with their agreement to be friends, he puts coffee in front of her.

“Thanks,” she says absently. “Why haven’t we anything more?” she adds to the air. “We think she’s a model too, but we don’t know yet. What’s Lanie’s hold up? And why hasn’t CSU got anywhere?”

Castle has a sudden thought. “We’ve had two,” he says. “Has anyone else had any?”

“Huh?” Beckett says, and then registers the words. “Oh my God. You really think… oh my God.” She turns to her computer and taps rapidly, then waits for the search to run.

“It’s a theory,” Castle says, cheered by her immediate action and instant following of his thought.

“If there are more, then we might have a serial.”

“A serial?” Montgomery says from behind Beckett’s back.

“The murdered models, sir. We’re just running a search to see if there are any more in other precincts.”

“Okay, Beckett. Lemme know if you find any, and before you go calling them up. Protocol, okay? I better talk to them first.”

“Yessir.”

A few moments later the search finishes. It’s not terribly helpful – until about halfway down, when there’s a record of a Jane Doe found dumped in a corner of Central Park. In obedience to Montgomery’s orders, Beckett enters his office and reports the information.
“Okay. I’ll put in a call to Captain Calish, and when I’ve done that you can call Central Park. You got a contact there?”

“Yessir. Detective O’Leary, sir.”

“Oh, yes. I forgot you knew each other. Okay. I’ll give you the go-ahead soon as I’ve made the call.”

Beckett re-emerges from Montgomery’s office and frets very obviously until he gives her the thumbs-up. Castle watches her restless fingers and continual checking of her e-mail, and has a hard time not stopping her incessant movement. Normally, it’s he who fidgets.

Beckett has her phone out and is dialling in no time at all.

“Hey,” she says happily. “I need to talk to you about a Jane Doe you picked up. You got some time?”

“Sure,” rumbles down the phone. “I could do some visitin’. An’ I hear you got a coffee machine that’s the envy of 1PP.”

“Okay.” She reels off the case number.

“Got it. Seeya. I’ll be over about two. Gotta couple of things to do first.”

“See you,” Beckett says, and cuts the call.

“What’s happening?”

“O’Leary’ll come over at two to tell us about their Jane Doe.” She smiles calmly. “You two didn’t get a chance to talk on Saturday. He’s a good guy. Got some interesting stories about cases. We used to work together, back in the day.”

**You’re not saying that you’re dating him, Beckett. Why not?**


“Weren’t you listening? They’ve got a Jane Doe that fits with our two cases. He’s coming to talk it through.”

“You know him too?” Castle asks.


“Yeah. Not many six-ten cops around,” Ryan says.

“Let’s get on with it,” Espo says very quickly on top of Ryan. “I’m not lookin’ dumb in front of Central Park.” He sweeps Ryan off with him. Castle looks after the dust trail he raises as they go, confused.

“Why’s Espo so keen to get on with it?” he asks.

“History.”

“Uh?”

“Espo’s pretty good at sparring,” Beckett says, “and up till he met O’Leary, he’d never lost. Espo’s
mean, fast and sneaky, and he trains hard.” Castle’s eyes gleam. He can see this story. “But O’Leary, for all he’s the size of a house, is also mean, fast and sneaky – and twice Espo’s size. Espo lost. Took it with good grace, but he doesn’t like losing. So… he wants to show O’Leary that we’re better at detecting.”

“O’Leary’s Homicide too?”

“Yep.” Beckett’s computer tings with an incoming e-mail, and she yips happily. “Finally! Just in time. Lanie’s sent through tox on Melinda – and prints for our second victim. Let’s get those run.”

“What’s on tox?”

“Give me a second,” Beckett says, tapping the prints into the search. She clicks the Enter key with force and lets it go. “Tox. Hmm.” She scans down on screen. “Well. That’s weird. Really weird.”

“What’s weird?”

“Come look,” she invites. For a few moments, lost in a Beckett-flavoured case, it’s all going just like it used to.

“That’s definitely weird,” Castle agrees, skimming down the results. “She was shot and beaten post-mortem, but she actually died of a heroin overdose?”

“Yeah. Why bother with the bullet, or the beating?”

“I’d call that overkill,” Castle says, and flicks Beckett a mischievous sidelong look for the pun. She stifles a groan. “Or it’s designed to confuse us.”

“Any good ME would work it out.”

“Time wasting?”

“Yeah, but why?”

She picks up her phone and calls Lanie. “Lanie, hey, it’s me. When do you think you’ll get the results on Saturday’s vic?”


“Well, if you can’t do that, can you do me a favour? Pull the record on this case” – she recites the number – “and send it over. O’Leary’s case,” – Castle grimaces – “but it looks similar. He’s dropping by after lunch. Would be nice to be ahead of him.”

“Thanks, Lanie. See you later.”

She clicks the phone off with a satisfied air. “There. I’ll get a chance to read it before he gets here and that’ll make things move faster.”

Castle is extremely keen on things moving faster, specifically O’Leary’s visit. He has no desire whatsoever to spend a moment longer than necessary in O’Leary’s oversized presence. On the other hand, call it self-torture or (more accurately) masochism or whatever you will, he’s also not giving up his gig as Beckett’s partner. O’Leary’s words on Saturday had bitten very deep indeed, and however pigheaded it might be, Castle is not going to prove O’Leary’s point for him. O’Leary might be Beckett’s boyfriend – for now, Castle doesn’t think that’ll last for ever, and anyway O’Leary’s not right for Beckett (he’s right for Beckett) – but he, Castle, is her partner and he’s
sticking there. Muscle-bound mountains or not.

Beckett’s e-mail tings again, and Castle peers over her shoulder to read the summary.

“Same MO,” he says.

“Yeah, but no ID of any sort. Weird. Usually people have *something.*”

“Maybe she wasn’t American.”

“You mean that she wouldn’t have prints or dental or a social security number?”

“Yeah.”

“Mm. But – oh. Let’s ask O’Leary if they checked up on green card or that sort of thing. Student visa?”

“Oooohhh,” Castle says happily. “International crime. Maybe she was MI6. Or KGB.”

“Not KGB, they don’t exist any more. Though this girl is Slavic. But I still don’t think she’s a Russian spy.”

“International spies,” Castle muses, returning to his chair.

“No spies.”

“Beckett, you are absolutely no fun at all. C’mon. She could be.”

“Nope.” She looks at her watch. “Just time to get a sandwich before he gets here.” She glances at the boys. “Ryan, Espo, wanna sandwich?”

“Sure,” they say.

Castle thinks that it’s no doubt for the best that they’re all going together, but it doesn’t stop him wishing that it was just Beckett and he. Somewhere in the day they’ve at least achieved normal, for now.

Friends.
Over the course of buying and eating lunch, Castle has the very odd impression that Ryan wants to talk to him, and the even odder impression that Esposito is making sure it doesn’t happen. On the other hand, Beckett appears to have noticed nothing, so maybe he’s just being oversensitive courtesy of the coming need to be civil to O’Leary. After all, he’s friends with Beckett, so he should be civil to her boyfriend, and into the bargain he is famously suave and sophisticated, so surely he can manage to behave?

He doesn’t want to behave, and the nearer O’Leary’s arrival approaches the worse his mood becomes. Friends or no friends, civility, suavity and sophistication or not, he wants to throw a tantrum that his teenager would scorn (even on the weekend’s evidence) and finish up by pulling Beckett into Consultation Room One (which has no internal windows) and kissing hell out her till she realises that she shouldn’t ever have moved out. Right now, and indeed right then, she would fit in his loft just fine.

“Something up?” Beckett enquires.

“No.”

“You’re growling.”

“Me? I don’t growl. I’m not a bear.”

“Yeah,” Beckett says. “For sure.”

Beckett thinks that she’d be only too happy if Castle had been a little more bear-like. Teddy bear like, as in cuddlable and takeable to bed with her. Still, he’s made it clear that’s off the table. She reads the tox report on Melinda and the report on O’Leary’s Jane Doe again. She still doesn’t get why anyone would die from an overdose and then be beaten up and shot.

She’s continuing to ponder the multiple methods of murder, and ignoring Castle’s change of mood to general ire, when the floor vibrates and she turns to the elevator to find the massive, smiling figure of O’Leary. She grins delightedly in return, genuinely pleased to see him, and rises from her chair.

“Hey, O’Leary. Come to watch us solve your case?”

“Thought I’d come to solve yours,” he drawls, glinting toothily.

“You’ve had this one for six weeks, and you’ve not solved it yet. I’ve got two in a week, and I’ve got similarities.” She explains the model agency, and the post-mortem issues.

“This second one, you got ID yet?”

“Nope. You don’t have any on your one, so we” –

“We?”

“Castle and I – wondered if she wasn’t from around here.” Beckett smirks. “I don’t mean not from New York City, I mean not from the States.”

Castle looks up, without any pleasure at his theory being mooted.
“Foreign?” O’Leary hums. “Could be, I guess. We tried everythin’ I could think of, but nothin’ came up.”

“Visa or green card?” Castle says. He can’t help the very slight edge on his voice. Beckett had looked so happy to see O’Leary that Castle’s utterly cast down.

“Din’t think of that one. But we got a cleaned up pic. Bit bruised, but you might be able to try it on your model-man.”

“We could try the other one, too,” Castle puts in, to prove he can help solve cases too. He’s not letting O’Leary out-think him.

“Yeah,” O’Leary agrees, and favours Castle with a wide grin. Castle, looking straight at his enormous bulk, is not notably cheered by it, and manages only a cold stare in response. “Tell you what, Beckett, me and Castle here’ll go off an’ terrorise the agency.” His grin turns evil. “I haven’t done any good terrorisin’ in a while. You’re not gonna spoil my fun, are you?”

“Just make sure they don’t try to use you as a model.”

“Huh?” O’Leary emits, wobbling small items of furniture in his surprise.

“When we” – she gestures at Castle and herself – “turned up they were all for putting us in a photoshoot test run.”

O’Leary’s sizeable shoulders shake with his snort of laughter. “Really? There’s a tale to liven up the journey. Your writer here can tell me it on the way. You can’t tell a tale worth a dime, Beckett. Never could.” He turns to Castle. “C’mon. You gotta tell me this story. I don’t get any good stories lately.”

Castle, utterly confused and not at all wanting to go anywhere with O’Leary, looks at Beckett.

“You guys go. If I have to look at Selwyn again I might shoot him. O’Leary, if you rat on me I’ll shoot you.” She makes a shooshing motion at both of them. Castle reluctantly clambers to his feet and is ushered out, with something of the attitude of having been arrested.

Beckett watches them go with a slight smirk. Castle will enjoy O’Leary’s wilder tales of life in Central Park, and O’Leary won’t tell tales out of school about her, for fear of her wrath. To boot, she’ll get a quiet afternoon to think about the case.

O’Leary is intrigued by Beckett’s comment about modelling. He’s even happier because now he’s got a chance to talk to Castle, who writes books he enjoys and who is clearly absolutely gone on Beckett. Of course, it’s also clear that he’s furiously jealous of O’Leary himself, which O’Leary doesn’t get. Surely Beckett had let on that he was gay. Still, he’s got the chance he wanted, so he might as well use it, though it won’t stop him having a little fun on the way. Castle is quite cute, for an older guy, and O’Leary, in love with Pete as he is, isn’t above a little gentle mischief, should the conversation turn out that way. If Castle’s used to the Manhattan literary scene, which he surely is, he must have been hit on a few times. O’Leary grins evilly to himself and ushers Castle to the cruiser.

Castle is not in the slightest happy. He doesn’t want to spend time with Beckett’s boyfriend, he doesn’t like feeling small – physically or indeed emotionally, since he knows he’s got no right to object to Beckett having any boyfriend she wants – and he doesn’t want to encounter Selwyn again. He’s not sulking, precisely. He’s merely reluctant. He pulls himself together and decides that he, at least, can be civilised and adult.
“You got mistook for a model?” O’Leary rumbles, shivering the casing of the car. “I gotta hear this story, an’ Beckett can’t tell a good story. Never could.”

“Never? How long have you known her?” Castle jerks out, surprised and unwilling.

“Since she was a rookie.”

“Uh?” Castle says inelegantly. If O’Leary’s known her that long, how come they’ve only just got it together now? That’s verging on nine years, and that’s a very long time to catch each other’s eye if they’ve known each other. “Long time,” he adds.

“Yeah,” the big man grins. Then he stops. “She tol’ me not to tell tales outta school, though,” he droops. “An’ she’s scary when she’s mad, for all she’s such a tiny little thing.”

Castle discovers an impossibly small tendril of liking for this mobile mountain. He tries to uproot it. He doesn’t want to like O’Leary.

“Tiny?” he manages instead.

“Tiny,” O’Leary says firmly. “Small but mean. Now, what’s this about you two being mistook for models? C’mon, I wanna hear the story. Gotta be good.”

Castle, very reluctantly indeed, finds another tendril of liking sprouting for this drawling, hayseed Magog, and launches into the tale of the unfortunate misunderstanding. With every sentence O’Leary’s snickers expand.

“He said she was a bit old?” he croaks. “Lordy, I’d’ve given good green dollars to see her face. An’ told her to dress sexy? Gee whiz.”

“Gee whiz?” Castle repeats. What sort of language is that for a cop?

And suddenly it dawns on him that O’Leary is putting on a front. He’s behaving nothing like he had on Saturday, when he’d been keen-gazed and somewhat aggressively protective. Castle’s patience snaps.

“Okay, what’s going on here?” he asks bluntly. “If you want something, try asking.”

“Waaaallll,” O’Leary drags out, wide enough for the prairie, “that din’t take as long as I thought it would. Guess you do pay ‘tention after all. I could ask you the same thin’.” Thoughts of mischief die, unmourned.

“I asked first. Why’d you set this up?”

“Wanted to chat to you.” The tone does not convey a friendly conversation about sport over beer and fries. “Find out why my Beckett’s so mis’rble.”

“Your Beckett?” Castle bites. “If she’s miserable than that’s down to you.”

O’Leary blinks slowly, in manufactured surprise. “Down to me?” he repeats, without any hint of a hayseed drawl at all. “Why’d you think it’s got anything to do with me?” He knows why. He’d deliberately let Castle believe why, and now he’s going to make him admit it, and then he’s going to make him choke on his assumptions.

“You’re the one who’s dating her. If she’s miserable, you solve it.”

“Dating Beckett? Who told you that?”
“Esposito.”

O’Leary raises mental eyebrows. Espo doesn’t lie. On the other hand, he’s awful protective of Beckett (much like O’Leary is), and it wouldn’t much surprise O’Leary if Esposito’s told the truth in a pretty misleading fashion.

“Really?” he says blandly, and waits.

“Well, golly gee whiz, as he don’t say. Castle here musta done a bit of lookin’ around, and Beckett hadn’t made her bed. Well, shit. No wonder the man’s lookin’ daggers at him. Letting him think they’re datin’ for a day or two is one thing. Bedsport’s quite another. It occurs to O’Leary’s trained detective skills that if that had been the prelude to leavin’ Castle at Beckett’s, then the conversation might not have gone well. Can’t have been that bad, though. Castle ain’t dead. He guesses he’d better clear this mess up.

“Seems like you been misinformed,” he says carefully.

“An’ I told her she should hear you out.”

“An’ I told her she should hear you out.”


“None of my business who she’s dating: you or that jerk out of Robbery.”

O’Leary has no idea who that jerk out of Robbery might be. As far as he knows, they’re all pretty decent guys.

“Mmm. So you turn up at her apartment glarin’ holes in the door just ‘cause it’s none of your business? Lookin’ round ‘s if you can’t believe your own two eyes just ‘cause it’s none of your business? You got a funny definition of none of your business, the way I see it. I thought you thought it was plenty of your business, me bein’ a detective an’ all. Seemed to me you was hopin’ for to find her on her own, ‘cause you looked plenty shocked when you found me.”

“I needed to talk to her,” Castle says shortly, and clamps his lips closed on anything else he might say. Such as what does you been misinformed mean?

“An’ I told her she should hear you out.”


O’Leary takes a modicum of pity on him. “Cause I ain’t datin’ Beckett. She’s my pal.”

“Don’t give me that crap.”

“Ain’t crap. I ain’t datin’ Beckett, an’ I got no reason to lie to you.” O’Leary’s voice has developed a dangerous note. “Iffen you were this tetchy with her before Saturday, no wonder she ain’t happy.”

“I didn’t make her unhappy,” Castle snaps in instant, instinctive rebuttal.

“You say?” O’Leary snaps back. “You just keep tellin’ yourself that, writer. Mebbe in a year or two you’ll make yourself believe it.”

“What do you know? I offered her a safe home. I didn’t find out till Saturday why Beckett walked out without a word after barely a week. You go ask her why she didn’t tell me a thing. All she says
is that she didn’t fit. She could’ve fixed the whole mess by telling me why she left. She’s the one who wasn’t talking and she’s the one dating other people.”

“Well, she ain’t datin’ me.”

“Yeah, right,” Castle says sarcastically. “She’s just sleeping with you. Like hell you aren’t dating,” he says over O’Leary’s irate growl. “Beckett wouldn’t sleep with someone she wasn’t dating.”

“She ain’t datin’ me,” O’Leary emphasises. “Far as I know, she ain’t datin’ anyone. An’ before you start shootin’ your mouth again, she ain’t datin’ me ’cause I got someone else.”

Castle’s mouth shuts on a tide of disagreement. “Someone else?”

“Now that’s none of your business. Mebbe if you ask Beckett nicely, an’ stop bitchin’ at her, she might tell you. I ain’t gonna. I don’t owe you nothing.”

The remainder of the journey to Stardance is completed in silence. O’Leary is thoroughly irritated with Castle, who he’d thought he might like, iffen only he could pull his dumb head out of his writer’s ass. Castle is both irritated and confused by O’Leary’s commentary, given that it completely contradicts all the known evidence.

Stardance is as discreet as last week. It’s a different receptionist, but Selwyn is as terrified of a Castle-O’Leary pairing as he was of Beckett, and whisks them to his office before they can upset anyone else. O’Leary doesn’t sit down, being afraid of breaking the chairs as much as he’s afraid that they’re as uncomfortable as they look. Castle doesn’t sit down because he knows how uncomfortable the chairs are and also he’s rather keen on displacing his irritation on to Selwyn. Some intimidatory glaring is the perfect start.

“I told you everything last time,” Selwyn whines at Castle.

“We’ve got some more questions for you,” he raps back.

“Do you recognise either of these girls?” O’Leary asks, holding out the photos. Selwyn looks down and gasps.

“That’s horrible,” he gulps. “Who did that?”

“That’s what we’re tryin’ to find out. Now, you recognise them?”

Selwyn examines the shots. “I think so,” he says irresolutely. “This one” – he points to the African-American woman – “looks like it might be Carissa. That one… I’m not so sure. Maybe Daniela.”

“Full names?”

“Carissa Nbele and Daniela Petrovich.”

“Were they on your books?” Castle queries, playing a hunch.

“They had been. Carissa left about two weeks ago. Daniela more like two months.”

Castle and O’Leary exchange interested glances, their head-butting put aside for now. “Where did they go?” Castle asks.

“I don’t know. I didn’t see them anywhere else.”

“Just like Melinda.”
“I guess so,” Selwyn says doubtfully.

“We’ll need everything you can give us about their jobs. Just the same as you did with Melinda. Contract, shoots, all of it.”

“You won’t be wantin’ a warrant, now, will you?” O’Leary adds, with a hard stare.

“No, no, whatever you need.”

“Anyone else dropped out lately?” Castle enquires, on a hunch.

“Not that I can think of,” Selwyn replies, after a considerable time for reflection. “But…”

“But if anyone does,” O’Leary rumbles deeply, “you better tell us right away. Looks like someone’s pickin’ off your girls.”

They leave a white-faced Selwyn slumped at his oversized desk.

“That was int’restin’,” O’Leary opens. “Nice shot about the girls workin’ there.”

“I had a hunch,” Castle says.

“Mmm.” O’Leary pauses while he pulls out into the traffic. “I been thinkin’.”

He has been thinking, during the interview. Castle had been pretty useful, and O’Leary thinks he might’ve been just a bit rough on him. Course, Castle had bit back, hard enough to prove he wasn’t a pushover.

“Mm?” Castle hums non-communicatively.

“I don’t guess you b’lieved me when I said I din’t date Beckett. Now, you got to promise you don’t tell her I told you this, ‘cause I like my nose an’ ears just where they are right now” –

“She does that to you too?” Castle squawks.

“Used to. Not any more. Anyways, that’s not important. I said we’d been pals a long time, since she was a rookie. Year behind me, give or take. Din’t know her then. Met her on a Vice op – well, arrested her. She’d been sent undercover. No-one tol’ me.” O’Leary still sounds a bit ticked off by that. “So I arrested her, and she put up a fuss, an’ I stuffed her in the back of the car, an’ by an’ by she admitted to bein’ a cop. So we got talkin’. Been pals ever since.”

“Okay,” Castle says, stunned by the story and not a little amused.

“Lot of people thought we’d been datin’. That was ‘cause we made it look like that. She was lookin’ for a good excuse – an’ so was I.”

Castle’s mind works at light-speed, boggles, and blurts out its bogglement before he has a chance to think. “You’re gay.”

“Give the man a gold star,” O’Leary drawls.

“Why couldn’t she just tell me that?”

“Don’t think she remembers, most of the time. It ain’t an issue.”

Castle strongly suspects that O’Leary experiences very few issues, at his size, whoever and
whatever he meets.

“So what I’m sayin’ is, I ain’t dating her. But I’m her pal, an’ I don’t like seein’ her this upset. So I think the pair of you are as dumb as concrete, an’ you should try ‘n’ fix it. That’s all.”

O’Leary’s glacier sized smile gleams. “I think you might be a nice guy, iffen you tried. Sorta cute. I got some friends who’d like you, if you wanna switch side.” He manoeuvres the car into a space in front of the Twelfth and manoeuvres himself out. “An’ by the way, I like your books.”

Castle is still swallowing down that last titbit when O’Leary’s out of sight. By the time he’s digested it, and made it up to the bullpen, Beckett is already grilling O’Leary.

“So there’s three of them that quit without warning, all from Stardance?” She ponders, tapping fingers and a pen on the desk. O’Leary is perched on the edge of the desk, inadvertently looming. Castle skitters in and flumps down into his chair.

Beckett detects rather less tension between the two of them than had been apparent on Saturday or indeed two hours ago, and is content. She’d rather the two men got along. It looks like they’ll all have to work together on this one, and it’s not helpful if there’s head butting and horn locking.

“Looks like your theory might be right, Castle. We ought to check if any other models have gone missing, though we only picked up this Daniela.” She looks across the bullpen. “Ryan, I got a job for you,” she calls sweetly. “Start running these names. Espo, I want you to run all the Jane Does again to see if any of them looked like models. We looked for ones like our Melinda, but we only got Daniela. Let’s look through the ones that just recorded death by overdose.”

“What’cha thinkin’?”

“Don’t know yet. But I think we’ve got a serial out there.”

“Something’s not right,” Castle muses. “This seems too difficult for a single killer.”

“Mebbe so,” O’Leary agrees. “Too many, too quick, an’ overlappin’.”

“We need to find a link. So far all we’ve got is the agency, so let’s keep pulling that thread.”

So that’s what they do, though since they currently know nothing about any shoots that Carissa and Daniela might have been on, it’s not precisely productive. The remains of shift pass by in relatively smooth work, with the oddity of having a fifth person in the team soon absorbed.
Castle has no desire to return to his loft any earlier than he needs to. His mother will ensure that Alexis arrives home immediately after school – or will call him – and will remove her laptop at eight thirty. His mother, in fact, is for once angrier with Alexis than even he is: shocked to her core by the attitude that would have left her alone, destitute and homeless. He can’t bear to see his daughter until he knows *why*; until he has the story.

Therefore, when Beckett makes a general suggestion of burgers, he accepts, along with O’Leary. Esposito declines, without reason. Ryan admits to a date, with the Jenny he’s been seeing on a fairly regular basis for a couple of weeks now, and blushes quite beautifully pink when Beckett teases him about meeting her parents.

“Come on, then. I’m hungry. Let’s go eat.” Beckett is actually properly hungry for the first time in a while. She’s eaten, but she hasn’t really savoured anything. A nice juicy burger, plenty of fries and a very large milkshake sounds just the plan.

“Where’d you put it all?” O’Leary wonders mischievously. “You’re too small to eat all that.”

“I am *not* small,” Beckett snips. It appears to Castle that this is a well-worn argument. “You’re just ten sizes too large.”

“I’m perfectly formed,” O’Leary says, grinning.

“For a Bigfoot, sure.”

“Pixie.”

Castle chokes.

“Yeti.”

“Butterfly.”

Beckett emits a squawk of disgust and growls fearsomely. “I told you not to call me that,” she humphs.

“It’s the only way to stop you messin’ with me. C’mon. I told Castle here we were pals, an’ you’re makin’ me out to be a liar.”

“My guess is that you spent the entire journey winding Castle up and trying to flirt,” Beckett says lightly, and very fortunately misses O’Leary and Castle exchanging a glance of the *let’s not tell her what really happened* variety.

“Pretty much,” Castle says, and O’Leary drops him a slow, approving wink. The small tendrils of liking sprout a little further. Castle feels unaccountably happier about that. Beckett isn’t dating anyone, O’Leary might well be a good guy after all, and life is marginally better than it was at lunchtime. Though he’d still like to know what was going on with Esposito and Ryan, he decides. Maybe tomorrow he’ll try for some divide and conquer.

“Dessert?” O’Leary enquires. Amazingly, he has eaten only a relatively normal size of meal. Castle would have expected him to ingest an elephant, or a whole buffalo at the very least.
“Yep,” Beckett agrees with alacrity. She’s put away enough food to satisfy a starving tyrannosaur, and looking at her, Castle finally notices that she’s just a little finer-cut than…well, than before she was blown up. He concludes that her ill-stocked apartment has also been ill-stocked with food, or more likely, she couldn’t be bothered. He knows that when she’s upset, she doesn’t eat properly. When he’d come back – been allowed back – she’d been thinner, and that first case she’d barely eaten at all. So if she’s eating now, she’s a little happier.

Maybe friends is the right thing to do. But the thought of merely being friends still gripes at his gut. He refuses dessert, and selects only coffee. She might not be dating anyone, but she’s not exactly indicating that she wants to date him.

“Did O’Leary tell you any of his stories?” Beckett addresses him.

“No, he was too busy trying to get a rise out of me.” Which is very true, and very misleading.

“You should tell some,” Beckett suggests. “Maybe Castle can use them in a book.” She turns to Castle, grinning. “You know we attract weird cases. Well, O’Leary attracts a lot of funny ones.”

“Funny ha-ha or funny peculiar?”

“Funny ha-ha.”

“It’s the way I tell them,” O’Leary adds happily.

“I thought it was the way you arrested them,” Beckett snarks.

“I just round ‘em up an’ put the cuffs on ‘em,” he drawls.

“Sure you do. What about that illegal boxing club?”

“Aw, Beckett. That ain’t fair.”

She gives him a hard stare. He caves.

“Illegal boxing?”

“Waal, it went like this,” O’Leary starts. Beckett, happy that he’ll carry conversation, lets the familiar tale drift over her. “We got this dead guy, an’ the ME said he’d taken a single punch to the head. So that was a bit unusual.”

“Yeah?” Castle says, absorbed in the tale already.

“We did a bit of diggin’ an’ the only thing we could find – nothin’ on cameras, nothin’ in the financials, nothin’ at home – was that he was a fitness freak.”

Castle looks at O’Leary’s physique and contemplates what that might mean. The answer is not entirely reassuring.

“Muscles on his muscles, tendons out to here” – he demonstrates – “all he spent his cash on was those protein bulk-ups an’ steroids off the internet. Not healthy. Now me, I do my gym time an’ my drills an’ that’s enough for me.”

“Stop preening,” Beckett snips. “And stop pretending. You do two hours every day and then you go sparring.”

O’Leary attempts something that on a smaller man might be a pout. On him it’s more like an ice-
shelf, or a cliff.

“Stop spoilin’ my rep. ‘S not fair.” He goes back to the story. “So anyways, we chased down this
dirty little club in the back end of the Bronx” –

“You’ve been out of Manhattan? I thought you never went out of Manhattan.”

O’Leary ignores that, magnificently impassive.

“– an’ I went undercover.”

Castle grins, sure of what’s coming but enjoying the story all the same.

“Made like I was wantin’ some, um, special trainin’ an’ a bit of extra income. Took a week or
three, sure, but we weren’t in a hurry.”

Castle notices that O’Leary’s ungrammatical drawl is very much less in evidence this evening than
at lunchtime, and wonders how much he’d been trying to fool him, Castle. Quite a lot, he
concludes.

“I did a couple of fights, handed the cash in to the Sergeant at the precinct to keep safe, made a bit
of a rep, an’ finally some guy started boastin’ ‘bout how he’d never been beat; that he’d even
punched some guy out with one shot an’ he’d never got up. So – y’know, he was quite a big guy,
musta been two hundred an’ forty or so – I said I’d have a round or two.”

“And?” asks Castle, fascinated.

“Well, he might’ve been big but he wasn’t too fit, so I messed around for a bit then made it look
like a lucky hit an’ he went down like a sack of potatoes.” How very surprising, Castle thinks with
only a moderately large dose of sarcasm. “Then I put him over my shoulder, made like I was takin’
him to get checked out – an’ I was, just not where they thought – cuffed him when I was out of
sight an’ took him down to Holdin’.”

“So far so good,” Castle says cautiously. “Sounds like a result.”

“Waal, that was the slight problem,” O’Leary responds, and blushes. “He didn’t wake up for
twelve hours an’ we had to get a doctor in to check he was okay. After that I didn’t get to do any
undercover work for months.”

“And you complained to me for months, too. Whine? Oh boy. I could have spent six months
staking out a daycare centre and heard less whine.”

“Not fair, Beckett. Stop being mean to me.”

“I’ll stop being mean the day you stop calling me butterfly.”

O’Leary shrugs, and a small tornado riffles the serviettes. “Guess I’ll just have to keep putting up
with you being mean, then.”

Beckett grins. It’s all a bit better than it had been. Castle and O’Leary have made friends, which is
good. Really good. She and Castle are friends.

Which is not so good. But it’s better than not-friends. And since friendship is what he wants, she
won’t embarrass both of them by hinting at anything more.
Tuesday morning Montgomery summons Beckett to his office.

“Detective Beckett.”

“Yessir?”

“I have requested that we keep Detective O’Leary to work on our murdered models case.”

“Yes, sir,” Beckett says happily. “Thank you, sir.”

“I trust this will not present any problems?”

“No, sir. It all went fine yesterday.”

“Good. Please don’t let him break any of my detectives. They’re expensive to replace.”

“No, sir,” Beckett says, thinking that she’s going to have a hell of a job on her hands to stop Espo sparring with O’Leary every chance he gets.

“And don’t let him break any suspects, either. I’ve heard about his right hook.”

“No sir. No breaking people.”

“Good. Dismissed.”

Beckett scoots.

Strangely, Espo is in early. Very early. Not that he’s ever late, exactly, but it’s unusual for him to be here already. He follows her to the break room.

“Hey, Espo.”

“Yo. You okay?”

“Yeah. Thinking about the case.” She makes coffee, efficiently, for both of them. “Why beat them up?”

“Dunno. Wasn’t what I wanted to ask.”

“Oh?”

“Why’d you blow off Demming like that?”

“Didn’t need him. I told you. We had enough people.”

“So how come your pet mountain’s on this one?”

Beckett looks at Espo. She is immediately suspicious of his motives for asking. “Because he’s had a case that links up, and so we’ve got three linked murders which took place over less than four weeks. Thinking of which,” she attacks, “did you get anything else from that search on Jane Does?”

“Not yet,” he admits.

“Maybe something’ll come through if you keep looking,” Beckett says with meaning. Esposito takes the hint. At least he’s in before Ryan. Keep him quiet. Beckett and Castle might have mended the odd fence but Castle doesn’t need to know that Beckett heard him. Beckett deserves
better than Castle. He’s messed up one time too many.

Espo is committing the fatal error of thinking he knows best. Defending one’s friends is laudable. Doing so without finding out what they think, however, or might actually want, is downright dumb. Espo has forgotten that one’s mistakes tend to come back to haunt one. Or, more accurately, that the road to hell is paved with good intentions.

Esposito has also forgotten that Castle is used to observing all three of them, and that he has become almost as good at observing Ryan and Espo as he is at observing Beckett, though for different reasons. Since he’s forgotten that, he hasn’t thought that Castle might already be working out that something’s up. He wanders back to his desk without a single qualm, perfectly convinced that he has Beckett’s back.

Not long after, O’Leary arrives, preceded by the groaning of the elevator and a slight vibration of the floor and walls, and then finally Ryan. Castle, naturally, will not show up till some time later. He doesn’t do early. He usually shows up around the point Beckett’s looking for a third coffee.

Not too long after O’Leary tromps in, Beckett finds herself in need of a second coffee, to help untangle her thoughts. O’Leary lumbers after her.

“I’ll take one too,” he rumbles.


“Latte,” he answers. “And a bit of a chat that we didn’t get last night.”

Beckett raises an eyebrow at him.

“Don’t give me that look. Why didn’t you tell Castle I was gay?”

Beckett looks confused.

“The man thought I was datin’ you.” Confusion changes to outright astonishment. “He thought we’d been doin’ the nasty.”

“He what?”

“We’ve cleared it up. But you shoulda told him I was gay. Didn’t you see he was sick jealous?”

“He’s not,” Beckett says very sharply. “He’s not interested.”

“He’s not interested like a dog ain’t interested in a juicy bone.”

“Well, I’m not a bone and Castle’s quite happy just to be friends.”

“Don’t seem that way to me,” O’Leary emits in a soft bass. “How’re you so sure anyways?”

“Because he said so,” Beckett says flatly. “To that idiot Demming in Robbery.”

Ah, thinks O’Leary, that would be the jerk out of Robbery, then. One mystery cleared up. In fact, two. Demming (whoever he is: O’Leary hasn’t come across him) had asked Beckett on a date. Then, the idiot had talked to Castle, who’d given him the all-clear. Two idiots, and somehow Beckett had found out about it, so that makes three idiots. Though she’d not shot either of them, so maybe she’s only half an idiot. Oh, Lordy. This would give an agony aunt conniptions.

“Oh. You don’t think he was shammin’?”
“No.”

“Well, I think he’s pretty upset that you walked out his home, an’ when people get upset they say
dumb things.” O’Leary stares very hard at Beckett, who’s done plenty of dumb things when she’s
upset. Like this time. “I think you should kiss an’ make up.”

“Do you?” Beckett says coldly. “Thanks for your advice, but we have made up. I think I’ll stick to
the evidence. He wants to be friends. That’ll do fine.”

“Don’t get like that. Think about it. He got pretty pissed at me when he thought I was makin’ you
unhappy.”

Beckett takes her coffee and retreats to her desk without a word. O’Leary, well used to her ways,
leaves her alone and drinks his excellent latte in the break room. He knows she’ll brood on what
he’s said. Now he just has to decide whether to tell Castle that Beckett knows he told Demming
that Demming had a clear field to date her. That, he considers, can wait for a while. Till Beckett
has had a chance to think it over. You never know. She might do something sensible.

It’ll be a first, if she does, O’Leary thinks, and resigns himself to a certain amount of interference.
For their own good, naturally. Castle wants to be friends? Bullshit, Beckett. Beckett doesn’t care
and that’ll do fine? Equal bullshit. He guesses that he’ll need to buy an extra-large shovel.

Selwyn has provided some of the required information (no doubt terrified that they’ll return and
grill him again) by around ten a.m., which neatly coincides with Castle appearing with some coffee
for Beckett and himself. O’Leary, Ryan and Esposito all complain, whinge and whine, which gets
them precisely nowhere. Beckett sips her coffee and studiedly does not look smug.

She does, however, start cross-checking any points of similarity between the shoots that the three
women had been on. Unfortunately, there are quite a few. Beckett knows that this was very likely.
Same agency, same body type: there was always going to be overlap. She looks at her notes.
They’d all done lingerie shoots for the same designer. They’d all been dressed by the same guy –
Jose: the small, sparky Latino. They’d all had the same photographer, Carter Connor – the one
who’d been absent when they’d first gone to interview Selwyn. They’d all been in competition with
each other, which would normally give Beckett a place to start, but since they’re also all dead it’s a
bit difficult to interview any of them without a medium and an Ouija board. Beckett does not
believe in either.

“There are too many similarities,” she growls. “Nothing to tug on that’s different.” She sighs.
“We’ll need to interview everyone. All the staff, all the freelancers. Where’s that schedule we were
getting on with last Friday?”

“Got it here, Beckett,” Ryan says.

“Okay. Let’s divide it up. We had to try to find out about our second vic yesterday, but let’s get on
with it now.”

The augmented gang cluster round the board. Bit-part players such as receptionists, booking
assistants and so forth are swiftly flicked off to uniforms. Selwyn can safely be left out, having
been grilled twice, unless something new comes up. Spaces are left for the relatives of the two
other victims, in the hope that one or more of the remaining information from Stardance (which
should give some form of better ID than they have), the searches or CSU finds something to
provide them with a lead to tug on.

“Beckett!” Esposito says, a few moments later. “I got those Jane Doe searches.”
“Yeah? Let’s have a look, then.”

Beckett, followed by O’Leary, descends upon Esposito, who is thereby prevented from noticing Castle descending upon Ryan. O’Leary is standing in his sightline, which is roughly equivalent to parking an elephant in the way, though less messy and noisy.

“Want a coffee, Ryan?” Castle asks lightly.

Ryan, deceived into thinking it an ordinary offer, trots after him to the break room where Castle is already fidgeting with cups and milk and buttons, just as usual.

And then he speaks, and suddenly nothing is just as usual.

“What aren’t you and Espo telling me?” he asks conversationally. It is conversational, so there is really no reason why Ryan should be flinching and instantly worried. Except he is. His instincts are screaming at him that there is danger in the air, despite Castle’s mild tone and cheerful expression.

“Uh?” Ryan manages.

“It’s really weird. See, if Espo knows that O’Leary’s gay, why did he let me think that Beckett had gone on a date with him? And how come you didn’t say anything?”

There is a rather unpleasant silence, broken by Castle.

“So the code of Omerta is in place? Okay then.”

He turns his back to Ryan, and finishes making both coffees.

“It’s not that,” Ryan blurts out.

“Oh?” Castle says, in a delicately edged way which slices through the air and leaves Ryan wondering if his head is still attached to his neck.

“Espo isn’t happy with you upsetting Beckett.”

“Is this any of Esposito’s business?”

Maybe this time an arm has been removed.

“Demming told Espo that he’d asked you if there was anything going on between you an’ Beckett, and you said no.”

“So? Still not either of your business.”

Ryan faces up to his imminent death.

“Beckett heard you and Demming talking about her. So she blew off Demming and told him why, an’ he told Espo.”

Castle knocks over both coffee cups and swears sulphurously. It’s faintly possible he’s swearing at the spilt coffee. Or not. Still his voice remains mild, so it’s a mystery why Ryan is so desperate to flee.

“And does Beckett know that you pair” – Ryan hears epithets – “know?”

“I don’t think so. She hasn’t said anything to us – ‘bout Demming or you.”
“When did you find out she overheard?”

Ryan is incapable of stopping himself answering. “Friday.”

“I see,” Castle says, even now mildly. “So you closed ranks.”

Something about Castle’s eyes pins Ryan to the wall. “I told him he should tell you.”

“But you didn’t tell me.”

Castle picks up his coffee and wanders out of the break room. Ryan looks after him, worriedly. He has a sudden feeling of impending doom.
Castle takes himself back out to the bullpen, thinking furiously, which matches his furious mood. About the only good bit of the last few moments is that Beckett hadn’t dragged the boys into this fuck-up. They’ve managed that all by themselves. He’d thought that the boys had accepted him. Clearly not. He directs a vicious scowl at Esposito’s bent head, while he’s showing Beckett something.

He’s none too happy with her either. Why couldn’t she – oh. Why on earth would she? As far as she knew – till Saturday – she’d not fitted into his world. And then she’d heard him saying that Demming had a clear field, which would have confirmed her views that he didn’t care. Nothing like hearing it from the horse’s mouth.

Well. This is a fine mess he’s got himself into. Not without help, though. Certainly not without help. If Beckett had said why she moved out… if he’d realised what was going on… if either of them had ever spoken to the other about it afterwards…

And, of course, if Alexis hadn’t started it all off in the first place.

But if they’d talked… they might have found out earlier.

Noise and bustle indicates Beckett and O’Leary returning with identically nasty smiles, well before Castle’s decided what to do.

“We got another one,” O’Leary starts. “Hispanic. Same MO. Angelita.”

“Guess your theory was right,” Beckett adds.

“Good call,” O’Leary says, “specially on no evidence.”

“So now,” Beckett says, gloomily, “we all get to go and explain to Montgomery.”

“Why?”

“Because now we’ve got four. And four is definitely something Montgomery needs to know about.”

They troop into Montgomery’s office. Courtesy of O’Leary’s shoulders, there is barely space for all three of them, and Montgomery’s mischievous smile indicates that he hasn’t missed that it looks suspiciously like Beckett’s under arrest.

The smile slides off his face instantly when they tell him the news. “Are you sure?” he checks. They nod, dismally. “Dammit. That means we need to call in the big guns. Who was that profiler?”

“Jordan Shaw, sir,” Beckett says, without any particular happiness. She knows where this is going.

O’Leary looks interested.

“She caught the guy who tried to blow up Beckett,” Castle whispers. “Really cool toys.”

“Well, I hate to do this, but the case is bigger than we can manage. I’ll see if I can get you Jordan. You worked fine together last time. Can you hold off on any interviews till I get hold of them?”

“Yessir.” Beckett doesn’t sound happy.
“Dismissed.”

The three of them trail out. Beckett is radiating frustrated, irritated disappointment. O’Leary is mildly disappointed. Castle is thinking of all the cool toys the FBI had last time and therefore bouncing gently and happily on his toes.

“They’ll come in and take over,” Beckett grouses. “We’re doing just fine.”

“Not if they remember you from last time, they won’t,” Castle points out. O’Leary’s caterpillar eyebrows wriggle up his forehead. Castle turns to him. “Beckett went toe-to-toe with all of them and then when the killer took Shaw she – Beckett, I mean – just took charge and they all went along with it.”

“Only works once,” Beckett mutters.

Castle and O’Leary, quite in charity with each other, exchange disbelieving glances. If the chips are down in the same way, they are both quite certain that Beckett will take charge in the same way and will get away with it. In the same way.

Beckett is giving off considerable indications that she doesn’t want company. Castle, with nothing much to play with and no-one to theorise with, relapses into some focused thought, which only serves to increase his annoyance with both Ryan and Esposito further.

O’Leary, having decided earlier that a little gentle interference to set Castle and Beckett straight won’t hurt (he’s too big for either of them to hurt him), and no longer inclined to wait for Beckett to be sensible (which would take weeks, on normal terms) begins his campaign with the easier target.

“Coffee, Castle? You can show me how your fancy machine works. We don’t get that at Central Park.”

“Sure,” he assents, and they wander off to the break room, where O’Leary quietly closes the door. An audience is not required.

“I found out something interesting this morning,” he rumbles.

“Yeah?” says Castle.

“Found out why Beckett might be unhappy with you.” Castle raises eyebrows, and, very interestingly, doesn’t seem to look surprised. O’Leary wonders if someone’s said something to him, and if so, who. “She heard you an’ Demming. Or mebbe I should say that jerk from Robbery?” Castle doesn’t react at all, which confirms O’Leary’s suspicion that he’s found that out too. “She told me this mornin’. But you already know, don’t you?”

“Yes. Ryan told me. This morning, when I asked him outright. He and Esposito knew since Friday.”

“Ouch,” O’Leary comments, which doesn’t quite seem to cover the case or the hard glint in Castle’s eye.

“Same as they knew you were gay, and let me think you were dating Beckett.”

“Unkind,” O’Leary agrees. Castle elevates his eyebrows again, in a manner indicating that O’Leary’s comment is somewhat understated.
“So why are you telling me?” Castle asks, aggression underlying the words.

“’Cause I think you need to know. I think both of you are unhappy, an’ you need to make up. Told Beckett that, too.” Castle stares at him. “So what’re you goin’ to do ‘bout it?”

Castle drains his coffee cup in one gulp, and walks out without a further word. O’Leary finishes his more slowly, decides that least said now will mean soonest mended, and goes back to find out what, if anything, is happening; and if nothing, to return to the search for proper ID by way of work visas and/or green cards.

Beckett, irritated by the likely addition of the FBI, and determined to push the cases as far as she can before anyone else messes up her investigations, is less observant than normal, but as the morning progresses even she notices that Ryan won’t go near Castle and that Castle is avoiding interacting in any way with Esposito. She has no idea why they’re arguing, but in her current state of irritation she’s more likely to chop heads than mend fences if she tries to fix it. She concentrates on her investigation and keeps her head firmly down. Castle departs noticeably before lunchtime, unable or unwilling to help with the tedious round of cross-checking and information gathering. The atmosphere is not notably eased thereby, and Ryan, at least, remains skittish and nervous every time there’s an unexpected noise.

Matters do not improve over the course of the day, and reach a general nadir when Montgomery informs them all that the FBI will be rejoining them the next day. Even though it’s Shaw and her team, it’s annoying.

What is even more annoying, at least for Beckett, is that she has run out of information and data to match up, and therefore has no excuse to remain in the bullpen long after hours. In short, she has no excuse to avoid returning to her chilly, half-furnished apartment. O’Leary’s gone home to his Pete, and she doesn’t think that Ryan and Espo are keen on anyone’s company. They’re shuffling off together, very surreptitiously casting her awkward, unhappy glances. She lets them go. Tomorrow will be soon enough to establish just what is wrong between the three men.

Instead, she leans back in her chair, still in the bullpen, and considers the last day or two. Mostly, she considers O’Leary’s astonishing interference and statements of this morning. *I think you should kiss and make up?* Say what? O’Leary never interferes. It’s why she likes him so much. Anyway, it takes two, and they *have* made up. Friends again. Kisses, well, not so likely. Not that she would mind, but they’re not on genuine offer and she won’t beg.

Ryan had, some considerable point earlier in the day, managed to tip off Esposito that Castle knew the truth and – not to put too fine a point on it – he wasn’t exactly impressed. They agree to park the issue for later, and discuss it in the company of comforting beer.

“So how did Castle know Beckett overheard, anyway?”

“I dunno,” Ryan says uncomfortably. “He knew O’Leary was gay, too. And then he just said it wasn’t our business, asked when we knew” –

“And you told him? You dumbass.”

“You’d’a told him too. He was scary-calm.”

Esposito makes a very disbelieving noise. *“Castle? Scary? Maybe to you, but I think you just caved ‘cause you wanted to tell him.”*

“I told you you were wrong not to tell him first off, and now he’s mad with both of us. Just said we
closed ranks and walked off.”

“So?” Esposito says, full of bravado. “What’s he gonna do ‘bout it? We’re on Beckett’s team. He had his chance an’ didn’t want it, an’ he can’t bitch if someone else did.”

“You just keep saying that, Espo. ‘Cause I’m not betting against Beckett finding out ‘bout this whole screw-up and not being happy at all. Maybe you’re cool with that. I’m not.” Ryan thinks of something else. “And where’s the mountain fit into all of this? He’s been pals with Beckett since back practically at the Academy, and you can’t scare him into going along with you if he thinks you’re wrong. You aren’t good friends with him.” Ryan drains his beer bottle. “I wish I hadn’t listened to you,” he says dispiritedly. “I should just’ve told Castle when I first found out.”

Esposito is unimpressed. “Cops stand together,” he says. “Castle ain’t a cop an’ he’s not one of us.”

“He’s not one of us?” Ryan says, very sarcastically. “Naw, he’s not. Because none of us was there running into burning buildings to pull Beckett out. ‘S not our fault she’s not a crispy critter.”

Esposito stares at the unusual sight of Ryan really, truly, fundamentally disagreeing with him. Instead of considering whether Ryan might be right, however, he ignores the twinge of conscience.

“Never thought you’d come down on Castle’s side,” he says angrily. “I’m with Beckett. You kiss ass if you want.”

“Like you were right this time. You’re wrong, and I’m not going along with it. Do your own thing.”

Ryan stands and leaves, Espo staring after him.

Beckett packs up and trails uptown to her apartment. It’s chilly, more in atmosphere than temperature, and the walls have not acquired any decoration in the thirteen hours or so since she left. All her pictures and photos had been destroyed in the explosion. It occurs to her that she might be able to get copies of the photos if she asked her dad, but she can’t do that until she’s got some tables or shelves on which to put them. She puts her shield and gun in the bedroom closet, on a shelf – she needs a safe: another item to come off her next paycheque – and changes into bedraggled sweats and tee, face cleansed and hair in a messy ponytail. Dinner, while necessary, is not pursued with any enthusiasm, and in fact half of it is returned to the fridge.

She’s sitting at her small desk, reviewing her list of items to purchase and dispiritedly matching up the likely cost of each item with her available budget – she doesn’t want to dip into her limited savings any more than she already has, because who knows what disaster will strike next and anyway it’s not like she spends much time here so why bother – when the door is rapped.

Castle, incapable of sitting in the bullpen any longer without revealing his feelings towards Ryan, Espo and O’Leary about interference, and towards Beckett in general, lasts only around an hour after O’Leary’s words before departing untimely for home.

Fortunately, it is a school day and his mother is out. Castle does not want company of any sort. He’s in quite bad enough a temper already, without adding other irritations.

He is, in fact, very deeply hurt and angry that neither Esposito nor Ryan had let him know the truth. He’s always been aware that Esposito would come down on Beckett’s side, but he’d thought that Ryan was a little less biased. Seems not. Well, he intends to have a detailed discussion with Esposito in the not-too-distant future. Ryan can simply stew.
O’Leary, however, is simply weird. He doesn’t know Castle, he’s been friends with Beckett for years, and yet he’s weighed in almost even-handedly (today, anyway: previous times were a little less pleasant) and hasn’t taken sides. Yet. And at least he had the courtesy to let Castle know that there was another issue: not just his daughter’s efforts. He even told Castle not long after he’d found out. Hmm.

He has some lunch, then turns to his laptop, and constructs a series of confrontational scenes, none of which fit yet, but all of which might well be used later. It’s only partially successful in soothing his feelings. He gets why Beckett wouldn’t have told him – who opens a discussion along the lines of why don’t you want to date me? at any stage, let alone someone who’s convinced that you don’t want to know them? – because her pride is such that she’d never, ever admit to any of it, still less to feelings that are (apparently) unreciprocated.

Well, now he knows the whole of the problem with Beckett, he can think about how to fix it. Especially since O’Leary, who seems to be Beckett’s confidant, also seems to think that Beckett might want it fixed in a rather more – er – intimate fashion than she’s ever let on to him. Castle has no grounds for thinking this except that if O’Leary’s talking to him at all at this stage then clearly friends isn’t the sum total of Beckett’s thinking. If it were, O’Leary wouldn’t need to talk to him, because they’re being friends.

Writing and thinking has occupied a reasonable percentage of the day. Castle can hear Alexis arriving home, and pokes his head out of the study.

“Hey,” he greets her. There is a grunt, and Alexis starts up the stairs. “Aren’t you going to answer me?” he asks.

“You’re being totally unfair,” Alexis jerks out.

“So explain why you did it, then. I told you that we would revisit it when you explained and apologised to me, Grams and preferably to Detective Beckett.”

Alexis turns her back and storms up the stairs, without a further word. Castle sighs, and returns to his writing. Surprisingly, it goes quite well, which is more than can be said for either conversation over dinner – non-existent – or his removal of Alexis’s laptop at eight thirty.

Having removed the laptop, he informs Alexis – over her vociferous and vehement complaints of his unreasonableness, to which Castle responds by telling her that she knows what to do to resolve the position – that he is going out, and does.

Going out has been on his mind for some time, to be fair. His insight of far earlier in the day, that if they had only talked earlier in the day, that if they had only talked earlier they might have found out what the problem was earlier, has preyed on his mind till now. Since he’s (one) not wanted at home and (two) disinclined to stay in the hostile atmosphere; then he might as well go and see if he can recapture some of the closeness that had been growing between Beckett and him – before her apartment blew up. He is halfway there before he realises that it’s going to be after nine when he turns up. Still, he’s done that before, as has she. Reasonable visiting hours have never really figured in their lives.

And so he raps on the door and waits.

Shortly, the door opens. Expecting normal-Beckett, the first thing he sees is the top of her head, and it takes a fraction of a second to realise that she’s barefoot, and thus some three or four inches lower than he is used to. A brief perusal shows him that she’s changed into very casual homewear and is bare faced. It doesn’t detract from her looks. She simply appears younger.
Her initial expression of – is that *wistful*? – surprise only lasts an instant, and then her face slides closed: she’s back to precinct-normal Beckett: a little harder, a little older.

“Hey, Castle,” she says: perfectly friendly, splendidly null. “Have you got a theory?”

“Um…” he says, and steps forward so that she automatically steps back. Inspiration strikes. “Yes. Well, maybe. We didn’t talk about modelling, just about the usual lines of enquiry. But you said that the modelling business was one long bitchfest – which is a fabulous word, by the way” –

“Focus” –

“and I thought maybe if we bounced what being a model was like around a bit we might think of a new lead,” he runs down.

Beckett does not look precisely enthused.

“Are you sure this isn’t you simply trying to find out what my modelling experience was?” she asks pointedly. “If I find that you’re trying to give Nikki a modelling backstory” –

“No, no, no. Promise. No modelling in Nikki’s past.”

Beckett appears only moderately convinced by that statement.

Why do you need to come by at” – she consults her watch – “nine-fifteen anyway? Why couldn’t you leave it till the morning in the precinct?”

“Do you really want to open that conversation in front of the Feds?” Castle asks, in another burst of skin-saving inspiration.

“No,” Beckett concedes. “Definitely not.” She steps further back into her apartment in a marginally more inviting way. “I guess you’ll want some coffee,” she says.

“Please.”

To say that Beckett is astounded to find Castle on the doorstep for the second time in four days would be an understatement. However, he used to show up randomly at odd hours (as did she) to discuss cases and theories, so maybe it’s getting back to normal. Friends. And modelling is certainly not a discussion she wishes to have in front of *anyone* in the precinct, still less the Feds.

And, well, she’s very glad he did show up. Even if it’s only *friendly* on his part. He makes her chilly apartment a little warmer, its atmosphere a little brighter. Even if he doesn’t care. They’re back to working comfortably together on cases and that’s got to be a good thing.

She goes to her kitchenette and starts the kettle boiling: locates French press and mugs and prepares the drinks. Castle doesn’t get in her way, but wanders around, peering out the windows to see if there’s anything interesting (there isn’t); investigating the furniture (that doesn’t take long) and thankfully not repeating his commentary on her lack of anything. She brings them through – no tray as yet, it’s not a priority when there’s only one of her – and hands Castle his. As she does, she surprises a strange expression in his eyes, a slight sadness, as he thanks her. It’s gone as swiftly as it’s noticed.

Beckett sits at one end of the couch, Castle at the other: mugs carefully in hand or on the floor, out of the way of trailing feet. Beckett, in fact, has tucked her bare feet under her, knees towards Castle. It’s not *quite* defensive. Nor is the gap between them. Not quite.
I know the score

“So, tell me about what modelling’s really like,” Castle starts, after a gulp of coffee which is really concealing his desire to open a very different discussion starting with I wish I’d never given that jerk Demming any encouragement and finishing with come here I want to kiss you.

Beckett makes a very unpleasant face. “Bitchy.”

“I’d got that.”

“Yeah. Well. I only went to the test shoots because the pay was a lot better than waitressing and I wouldn’t have to do shifts. Even the test shoots were pretty vile.”

“Mm?” Castle says. Actually, he can guess. “How old were you? Selwyn said Melinda was seventeen when he spotted her.”

“Yes,” she says slowly. “Me too.” She sips at her coffee. “I wasn’t the youngest there.” Another slow sip. “I wasn’t a shrinking violet, either. But… well. Looking back, it was clear that some – maybe most – of the older girls had been to a lot of test shoots, and hadn’t been picked. So of course they were going to try to wipe out the competition. There was a lot of contemptuous looking up-and-down, as if they couldn’t believe that you had the temerity to try out, and a lot of sotto voce” – Castle grins at the words – “comments about appearance.” A further sip. “Fat thighs. Or horse-face. It was petty, low-level nastiness, but you could see some people wilting under it.” She shakes her head, appearing to shake away the memories. “Thing is, you never know how people will photograph or be able to wear the clothes. Sometimes the prettiest girls don’t shoot well, or their posture isn’t suitable. Anything to whittle down the crowds of hopefuls.”

“But you got through,” Castle says neutrally. He knows that Beckett takes a good photo. He has several, taken surreptitiously and stored both on his phone and at home. He is fairly sure that she doesn’t know that, on the grounds that he is not dead.

“Yeah.”

“Did something happen?” Castle asks suddenly. There had been a tone in her voice…

For a moment, there’s no answer or reaction. “No,” she eventually says, but it’s not entirely convincing. Castle waits quietly. “Not exactly. Just… all those eyes. Weighing you up. Judging you. Not all of them are… um… uninterested.”

Castle translates that perfectly accurately to mean that a noticeable proportion of the watchers had been leering unpleasantly.

“So anyway,” Beckett says in a subject-closing fashion, “I got through. Like I said, it paid better than waitressing. Just as well, because it’s much harder work than it looks.”

“Oh?” Castle asks, curious. “How?”

“Not physically,” she says quickly. “Mentally. You need to be acting, most of the time. Starting,” she adds acidly, “with acting like you actually want to be there.” It had taken her around two hours to decide that she didn’t want to be there. It had taken her two hours plus two minutes to decide that the pay cheque was sufficiently good that she could fake it. Stanford – or indeed, as it turned out, NYU – had not been going to be cheap. “Whatever the photographer or magazine’s vision is, you have to play along. If that’s happy people on a sunny beach, or bored in a bar, or…” she stops
there. Or sex, for perfume adverts. Some of those are pretty raunchy. Oh.

“Or sexy,” she says quietly.

Castle remembers Beckett’s tension at Selwyn’s comment on lingerie shoots, and keeps his mouth firmly shut.

“Perfume, or aftershave, or certain lingerie adverts. Sex sells,” she bites out, mouth twisted.

“I thought you said you were seventeen?” Castle blurs, shocked. Alexis is sixteen, and he knows how he’d feel if she were being eyed up by leering older men.

“Let’s just say Selwyn’s attitude was unusual,” Beckett says flatly, and stops there. Castle takes the hint – sort of.

“Maybe these victims were all being pressured into some sort of sex thing,” he says.

“Yeah, but how?”

“You said lingerie. Did we see what the photos were like? Or who they went to? If they didn’t just go to the magazine…”

Beckett’s eyes spring wide. “Portfolios,” she says. “We didn’t think of that. All the models and the photographer will have a portfolio: one which they use like a resume.”

“Maybe there’s a connection there.”

“How’d we find out where their portfolios went?” Beckett muses aloud. “Selwyn. They were on his books. He must know.”

“But the photographer was a freelance,” Castle objects. “So what about him?”

“I guess we start by asking him. Then we look for time gaps and fill them in.” Enthusiasm sparks in her eyes, then dulls. “But first we have to deal with the Feds.”

Castle wriggles a little closer. “Shaw wasn’t that unreasonable last time,” he points out. “And you don’t have broken ribs or a crazed serial killer stalking you.”

“I don’t have anyone stalking me,” Beckett notes.

“I could stalk you,” Castle says provocatively.

“You shadow me. The only difference is terminology – and Montgomery approved it.”

“You wound me. Shadowing is completely different from stalking.” Beckett raises a very cynical eyebrow. “It is,” Castle emphasises. “Totally different.”

“Let’s see. You follow me around, show up at my workplace, show up at my field trips, and show up at my apartment. What’s the difference?”

Castle, caught up in the give-and-take of theory and normality that he – they – hasn’t experienced since before her apartment blew up, doesn’t stop to think before answering.

“You like me being around,” he says smugly. “You wouldn’t have half as much fun without me there.” A very odd expression flitters across Beckett’s face. Her lips part on an answer, and then close with nothing spoken. When they reopen Castle is absolutely sure that it’s not the first answer
she thought of.

“You wouldn’t have your character if you weren’t there. I think you got a good deal.”

“I think it’s even. You get my ruggedly handsome, intelligent presence and I get inspiration.”

“I think it’s time I went to sleep,” Beckett says.

“I could help with that.”

“Yeah,” Beckett says very snarkily, “you could read me a couple of chapters of one of your books. That’d help me sleep.”

“Not quite what I was thinking,” Castle pouts, and since he’s had the opening, takes advantage. “I was thinking of something a bit more like kissing you goodnight.”

“Were you?” Beckett says, with no encouragement in her voice whatsoever. Her voice is lying through its teeth. If she had the slightest reason to believe he would like to kiss her – her: Detective Kate Beckett, not used-to-be-a-model Kate Beckett – then she might have allowed her true feeling to show: that a kiss (or several) would be very nice. But she doesn’t. He’s simply flirting just like he used to, with the crucial difference that she knows it’s all a façade.

“Yep,” Castle says cheerily, despite the discouraging tone. “Goodnight kisses are an essential part of any well-ordered bedtime routine.”

“Really? I must have missed that,” Beckett says, and stands up in a very unsubtle hint, which Castle has no option but to take.

He follows her to the door, thinking bleakly that he hasn’t managed any talking about anything useful at all. He has no idea how to open the subject of I know you heard me but I didn’t mean it. He is astonishingly tempted simply to haul her into his arms and kiss hell out her anyway, and then deal with the fallout afterwards, but she’s not exactly radiating receptivity and he’s not willing to behave like some Regency-era rake. He compromises, just before she can open the door and usher him through it, by hugging her gently and bestowing a soft kiss on her brow. He then escapes before he can be shot.

Beckett looks at the closed door with tired bemusement, and then puts the whole thing behind her in favour of sleep. Suddenly, she’s too exhausted to wonder or care about why Castle came by and certainly what the purpose of hugging her was. Sleep overtakes her much faster than she expects, and the next thing she knows her alarm is blaring in her ear.

Beckett wakes up with the portfolio lead pecking at her mind, and consequently attains the precinct in short and early order to consider in a calm and logical fashion how best to cross-check the three murders they already know about, and how to add the one about which they only found out yesterday.

She’s happily surveying her conclusions when there is a certain amount of noise and fuss and Jordan Shaw (plus sidekick Avery) arrives, pursued by tech and equipment and kit. Sadly, she is not pursued by a bear, which would have considerable entertainment value, resulting in Shaw’s extremely desirable exit.

“Detective Beckett,” she says brightly. “Hello. Good to see you again.”

“Hey, Agent Shaw. Agent Avery.”
Shaw regards her very knowingly. “Let’s have a chat,” she says, and without further argument or ado sweeps Beckett off to a conference room, leaving her sidekick behind.

“Another serial killer, Detective Beckett? Isn’t one enough?” Shaw teases sardonically.

“Yeah.”

“Look, I know you don’t like us coming in. No-one ever does. But we’re all on the same side here. I’m not interested in running your team, just in catching this guy as quickly as we can. We’ve got better, faster, access than you do, so suck it up and let’s get the perpetrator in prison.”

“I want him put away too,” Beckett says. They’re certainly on the same page there.

“Is it the same team?”

“ Mostly. We’ve got an extra man in – Detective O’Leary, from Central Park. One of the cases was his. We found the other one yesterday, but we haven’t brought that precinct in.”

“So what have you got?”

Conversation turns to a full discussion of everything Beckett’s team has done so far, winding up with the portfolio possibilities.

“I can’t think of anything that hasn’t been started yet, but I’ll push the labs. Priority access,” Shaw says, the first part of which soothes Beckett enormously. “I’ll pull all the ME reports and feed them into the machine, to see if they match anything we’ve seen before, and you go on with the portfolios? I won’t interfere with that, as long as you keep us in the loop about interviews. I’d like to sit in on any key ones.”

Despite the phrasing, Beckett recognises that as not a request but an order. “Okay,” she says, only a little reluctantly.

“Right. I’ll get Avery set up and start things moving.” Shaw smiles sardonically. “Where’s your pet spaniel?”

“Castle? He’ll be in later.”

Shaw flicks a glance at Beckett, which Beckett ignores. She’s not discussing Castle with Shaw.

“Trouble in paradise?” Shaw adds even more sardonically.

“Don’t profile me,” Beckett snaps. “We are not in a relationship now and we weren’t last time either. You’re still wrong.”

Shaw shrugs, disbelievingly, but fortunately doesn’t say anything about Castle. “Any messages or communications?”

“Nope. Nothing.”

Shaw looks mildly disappointed, and then senses the vibration of the floor and turns round to survey the massed muscle of O’Leary. “What is that?” she says.

“That’s O’Leary. Old friend.”

“Wow. What do they feed him?”
“Raw elephant,” Beckett says. “One per day.”

Shaw laughs.

“Mornin’,” O’Leary rumbles as he approaches. “We got anythin’ new?” He glances the long way down to Shaw’s red head. “You the FBI? Don’ look much like any agent I ever saw.”

Shaw gives him the hard stare. “I’m a profiler. And despite that attempt to sound like you just fell off the haywagon from Nebraska, I expect you’ve got a brain in there.”

O’Leary’s infectious grin creeps across his face. “Works on a lot of people,” he notes.

Before that can turn into any kind of detailed discussion, Beckett explains (without specifying the source) the thoughts on portfolios. Shaw listens all over again.

“You know a lot about modelling,” she says. “How much of it did you do?”

O’Leary chokes. Long-time pal he might be, but Beckett had kept that quiet. “You were a model?”

Beckett glares viciously at both of them. Shaw, with a very thoughtful expression, makes a tactical retreat to the room she and Avery are going to occupy, already sprouting high-tech equipment and analytical software. O’Leary, being too big to be damaged, snickers happily, causing small rodents to flee.


“Shut up.”

O’Leary, fortunately for his continued good health, wanders off to find a barrel in which to put his morning coffee, and on the way collects Esposito, who has arrived with an air that Beckett would normally attribute to a thumping hangover. When Ryan trails in, with the same hungover aura but including a dose of misery more appropriate to a close relative’s death, she remembers that yesterday she had thought that there was something going on. Now she’s sure of it. She decides to start with the easy option.

“Ryan, I wanna have a chat about the case.” That would be the case of why he, Espo and Castle were sending visual daggers at each other all day yesterday, rather than the case of the Murdered Models – oh God, that sounds like something Castle would say, or a bad Perry Mason title. She’ll Google, later.

Ryan trots into an interrogation room (for some reason, all the conference rooms are full, which is probably because the FBI have annexed the largest) after Beckett without the slightest qualm – at least until she closes the door and raps, “Sit down.”

“Oh? What’s up?”

“What’s going on between you, Esposito and Castle?”

Ryan cringes.

“So there is something.”

“We had a bit of a disagreement. ‘S all.”

“Oh?” Beckett says with an appearance of interest. “What was that all about? I don’t want us having disagreements that make the Feebs think we’re dumb.”
“Nothing like that,” Ryan says with relief. Relief is, as he discovers with Beckett’s next words, entirely ill-advised and premature.

“So if it wasn’t about the case, it must have been personal. What have you and Espo been doing to Castle?”

Ryan gapes. “How’d you know?”

“I didn’t, till you just told me.” Ryan cowers, to add to his cringing. “So what did you do?”

“It wasn’t me!” Ryan wails. “I told him I thought he was wrong.” He sounds like he’s telling his mom.

“What was wrong?” Beckett says, not sounding like a mother at all. More like an executioner. Silence descends. Beckett allows it to continue, rhythmically tapping her fingernails on the table.

“We didn’t tell Castle O’Leary’s gay,” Ryan offers up, in the vague hope that a small bone flung now will prevent the Beckett-wolf noticing the raw elk lurking in the undergrowth and tearing their throats out to get to it. It doesn’t work.

“Neither did I, and Castle’s not trying to incinerate me and you’re not looking at me like I kicked your puppy.”

Shit, Ryan thinks. Sadly, it’s written on his face.

“Right, so you did that deliberately, rather than just forgetting like I usually do. Why?”

Ryan makes like a fish.

“I said why?” Beckett yells, startling him. “What’s Castle done to you that you’ve suddenly turned on him, huh? He’s done nothing wrong.” She stands up. “I can’t believe you’d treat him like that,” she says, leaning on the wall. “And I know that’s not all of it, so either start talking or get out and send Esposito in.”

Unseen (that being the point of one-way mirrors) in the observation room, into which he had sneaked on discovering from O’Leary that that’s where Beckett and Ryan had gone, Castle is also gaping like a fish. Beckett defending him – vehemently – is absolutely not what he’d expected. He’d expected an interview. He hunkers down to watch the second episode of this show. The Esposito Evisceration, he thinks he’d call it. Episode One, the Ryan Ripped-A-New-One.

Ryan stands, then stops and leans on the chair, indecisively looking from Beckett to the door to the ceiling. None of these objects of his gaze help him in any way.

“Five seconds, Ryan,” Beckett snaps coldly. “Then I’m hauling Esposito in here, and you’ll get to stay.”

Ryan looks even less decisive. Five seconds pass.

“Okay.”

Beckett stalks out the door, and returns with Esposito, who, to Castle’s eye, is very obviously not friends with Ryan this morning. Yesterday’s discussion might have had some results.

“So. What have you and Ryan done to Castle?”

Esposito’s back instantly goes up. “Nothin’.”
“Don’t lie to me, Espo. I know something’s going on. What is it?”

“Why’d you care?” Esposito says combatively. “He doesn’t care about you. He just handed you off to Demming.”

Castle watches with total fascination as Beckett explodes. A fusion bomb might have done more damage.

“That is nothing to do with you. What the hell do you think you were doing? You don’t interfere in my private business, ever. How’d you know anyway? Demming tell you? Did he tell you that I wouldn’t date him too?”

Castle reeled. She didn’t even go on a date with Demming? He hadn’t really believed that when Ryan had said it.

“I don’t get handed off by anyone to anyone. Demming behaved like a jerk but that’s still not your business. I can fight my own battles.” She stops, and then continues in glacial, deadly tones. “So now we’ve established that you had no business interfering in the first place, you can tell me what you did to Castle and why.”

“I didn’t do nothin’.”

“Yeah, and that’s where you were wrong,” Ryan bites. “I told you that you should tell him.”

Castle watches Beckett. With every word chill fury is settling more deeply on her shoulders.

“Demming told me you overheard an’ that’s why you blew him off.”

Esposito keeps talking.

“Okay,” she finally says. Each word drops ominously into a stretched silence, tension filling the air. “So you, Espo, thought that you had the right to treat Castle badly because he doesn’t want to date me.”

In Observation, Castle winces. Just as he’d surmised, Beckett has internalised the idea that he doesn’t want to date her. Shame that’s completely wrong. On the other hand… let’s see how this plays out.

“I see. Just remind me, will you, exactly what right you ever had to interfere in my private life?”

There is a hard, unpleasant, pause. Esposito says nothing.

“None. You have no right at all to know anything. Just because you’re part of some Boys’ Club with Demming doesn’t give you any rights to make my decisions for me or try and mess around with the people around me. If you think you can have that attitude, then I’ll have you transferred. I don’t care how good the team used to be, I’ll go to the boss and tell him you aren’t able to work effectively with a woman.”

“But…”

“No buts. That’s exactly what you’ve just done.”

Esposito looks as if he’s been punched out. “Beckett…”

“No. You’ve decided to freeze out the guy who – remember? – saved my life, who’s part of our team and my partner, because you and your pals are pissed that he didn’t want to date me. Since
we all know Castle’s not gay, that can only be because you’re trying to protect the little woman on the team from getting her feelings hurt. The hell with that crap.”

Castle is very grateful that he’s not in the room. The flaying Beckett is delivering would not have disgraced any mediaeval torturer, and doesn’t look any less painful. Esposito is shrinking by the minute as his unconscious biases are uncovered, held up to the light, and dismissed with complete contempt.

“So let’s be completely clear. I don’t need your protection. You don’t go near my private life. And you go and apologise to Castle. And if you try this shit again, I’ll be in Montgomery’s office so fast you won’t have time to blink.”

She turns to Ryan. “You’re just as bad. I don’t care if you thought Espo should have said something. You didn’t have the guts to go against your pal when you knew he was doing the wrong thing. That’s how corruption begins.”

She sits back down. “Both of you, leave. I can’t believe you were so pathetically petty. Castle saved my life, but it seems that’s not enough for you two.”

Ryan and Esposito trail out. At the door, Espo turns. “I just…”

“Save it. I don’t want to hear it.”
The door closes behind them, and Castle watches as Beckett slumps in the chair and buries her face in her hands. He doesn’t leave Observation, and he’s not going to admit he’s heard that masterclass in demolishment. She’d certainly defended him, in terms, but that’s not the same as admitting whether she has feelings beyond friendship. So he stays watching, to see if anything useful might be gleaned.

There is no noise, no speech, not even noticeably heavy breathing. However, the fixed rigidity of Beckett’s shoulders argues for considerable control of overwhelming emotion. When there is an almost-audible sniff, and then she blows her nose, without even seeing her face Castle is quite certain that she’s biting back sobs.

And then she shakes her head, stands up, and walks out without the slightest appearance of any stress at all. It’s horrifying.

Castle does not leave Observation. He wants to think. Mostly, he wants to think about why Beckett might have been upset, rather than staying simply as furiously angry as she had been. A little bit, he wants to cuddle to himself the warmth of being vehemently defended by Beckett.

Warmth, unfortunately, is soon displaced by thinking. Castle doesn’t like miserable Beckett, especially when he thinks she’s miserable about him. Still, it could simply be reaction to having to take her co-workers apart. It was in his defence, though. Warmth trickles through him again. He replays the – well, not conversation – verbal dismemberment. She’d said twice: Castle doesn’t want to date me. She’d implied that this wasn’t a problem, but she certainly hadn’t said so in plain words. And then, boys taken apart, she’d emotionally broken down.

Hmmm. He’d thought yesterday that O’Leary had been hinting at Beckett having deeper feelings, but she hadn’t exactly given him any clues last night. Then again, he hadn’t – except for one kiss on her brow – given her any. Turning up at the other’s apartment was just what they used to do randomly, before… Before.

Never mind before. Before is past. What matters is now, and right now Beckett is upset about something that happened in that interrogation room. Castle likes best the conclusion that she’s upset that she’s had to acknowledge out loud to the boys that he doesn’t want to date her, so she thinks. He’ll just stick with that ego-stroking conclusion until proved wrong. And if she’s upset that he doesn’t want to date her, then she’ll be receptive to being dated.

Probably.

Where Beckett is concerned, nothing is certain, nothing is sure. However, Castle’s deviously optimistic nature is taking over, and he’s quite sure that he’ll be able to coax Beckett into wanting to date him, if he simply makes it clear that it’s all been a huge misunderstanding on both sides. Well, she blew Demming off, so he must have a good chance, right? He bounces out of Observation and attains the bullpen by a route that includes leaving the Twelfth to patronise the usual coffee shop, which has the happy outcome that it will result in nobody spotting his starting point.

When he appears at Beckett’s desk, bedecked with coffee and bear claw, she is already irritated and frustrated. Mostly, it seems to be directed at the slowness of portfolio information arriving from Stardance. To a certain extent, it’s directed at Agent Shaw.
“What’s she done?” Castle asks, catching the direction of Beckett’s fulminating glare.

“Waah,” O’Leary says with a smirk, before Beckett can say anything, “Shaw clocked Beckett as having done some modelling, an’ she didn’t like it.” Beckett growls in angry assent. “An’ then she disappeared into that room” – he waves in its general vicinity – “an’ hasn’t been seen since. But she said she wanted to sit in on all the interrogations.”

Castle’s face falls. If Shaw’s in there, he can’t be, unless he stands in a corner out the way, rather like a naughty schoolboy.

“She’s plotting,” Beckett grouses bitterly. “She’s going to come up with some brilliant idea and we’ll all have to sit here and admire her.”

Castle does not make the mistake of pointing out Beckett’s obvious jealousy of Shaw’s cool toys – not this time. Instead, he sips his coffee and lets the dark cloud of her annoyance pass him by.

“I see your shadow has arrived,” floats across the room. Beckett’s fist clenches around an innocent pencil, which is in danger of snapping. Shaw arrives shortly after her statement, smiling in a cool, slightly smug fashion. If Beckett were a cat, Castle thinks, her ears would be flat and her tail lashing.

“I’ve run your cases against the database. We think there are some similar cases. I want you to come look at them.”

“How many?”

“Another four.”

Everyone trails after Shaw, without enthusiasm except for Castle, who is quite unable to conceal his bounces at the thought of the toys.

Agent Avery’s massive databases have chewed up their data and spat out four potential further deaths that the computer thinks are similar.

“So we got these,” Avery says. “Same MO, and same pattern. White, black, Slavic, Hispanic. Only thing is, these four were a year ago in San Francisco.”

Shaw looks bleakly at the hi-tech board. “Looks like we got a serial, folks.” She turns to Avery. “Any more?”

“No.”

“Strange. I’d have expected another cluster.”

“There might have been a trigger,” Castle says. Shaw regards him balefully.

“Indeed,” she emits.

“What? I had to research serial killers for Storm. I read all sorts of papers about it.” He gives her back an equally pointed look. “Some of them were even written by FBI profilers.”

Shaw makes a tactical retreat. “I suppose there might.”

“It might not be in the States,” Castle says, in a perfect example of unhelpfully timed helpful suggestions. Shaw makes a noise reminiscent of a cat whose tail has been trodden upon. Avery, by contrast, is already tapping at his laptop. He sits back with a satisfied expression.
“Okay,” he says. “That’s running a set of international searches. It’ll take a while.”

Beckett is impatiently tapping her fingers. “Can we get the information from San Francisco?” she asks.

“Sure, but not till these are finished.”

It’s Beckett’s turn to make a noise reminiscent of a cat whose tail has been trodden upon.

“Is there anything you can tell us before those searches finish?”

“No,” Shaw says blandly.

“Then I’m going to see if I’ve got those portfolio searches yet.”

Beckett stalks out. The faint noises of the bullpen slither in. To Castle’s complete non-surprise, these do not include Ryan and/or Esposito’s dulcet tones.

“Well, Mr Castle, I see you’re still here.”

“Yes,” Castle says cautiously, on alert.

“Still playing at being a cop.”

“I think you mean still writing very successful books, inspired by the fine officers and detectives of the NYPD,” Castle says dryly.

Shaw lifts an eyebrow. “Do I? I thought you were inspired by one person.”

Castle declines to be drawn, especially as O’Leary is smirking at him. He wanders out, in search of coffee. Dealing with Jordan Shaw is like walking a tightrope over a pool of snapping sharks: every sentence a possible disaster.

The break room is empty. This doesn’t last. Esposito stomps in, trailing a black cloud of bad attitude, anger, and well-covered unhappiness. “I apologise,” he forces out, sounding as if he’d rather say fuck you and the horse you rode in on, and stomps back out.

Somehow, Castle doesn’t think that that was what Beckett had meant by an apology. He hasn’t time to work out what to do about it when Ryan droops in, utterly miserable and not hiding it in the least.

“Man… Castle, I’m sorry,” he says, totally sincere. “Beckett was right. You saved her and we… um… I should have done what I thought I should’ve.” He turns away. “I guess it’s not enough.”

“It’s not,” Castle says coldly. “You’re right. I knew Espo would never give me the benefit of any doubt, but I thought you were a little less biased.” Ryan winces, which Castle sees with considerable satisfaction, and trails out, just as miserable as when he appeared. Castle turns to the coffee machine and concocts two coffees. His is extra strong, even compared with Beckett’s, which would normally scour mould from walls.

Beckett, when he attains his seat and puts coffee in front of her, is head down in dates and places for the four models, whose portfolios have apparently arrived.

“Anything helpful?” Castle asks.

“Not in the five minutes I’ve had them,” Beckett mutters blackly.
“Why don’t you get Avery to let his tech do the analysis? He could probably do it in seconds and we’d get a lovely map with different coloured lines… oh.”

Castle finally notices the hard-copy map on Beckett’s desk, on which there are, despite her comments, already a few coloured dots.

“I think I’ll just go and talk to O’Leary,” he says, before she reduces him to a few flakes of ash, and retreats precipitately.

Beckett goes back to her old school methods. She finds it gives her a better understanding. Not to mention that this way she doesn’t have to talk to Shaw or Avery. She is made deeply uncomfortable by Shaw’s evident delight in discovering her modelling past.

She is made deeply uncomfortable by any reminders of her modelling past, and it definitely isn’t helped by Castle’s sudden return to flirtation as soon as he found out about it. She tries to focus on her dots, but all too many memories creep around the edges of her mind and take sharp bites at her composure.

Daniela had gone to a ski-wear shoot in Aspen. (Nothing like typecasting, Beckett thinks acidly.) Melinda, lingerie in Manhattan.

She remembers that first lingerie shoot. It had started in the afternoon, which for a teen had been great: no need to rise early. She’d been uncomfortable, but then everything about modelling had made her uncomfortable. She hadn’t told her parents how uncomfortable modelling made her, because the amount it was adding to her college fund was substantial, and she was going to need every cent of it for Stanford. So she’d had an extra cup of coffee, painted on an enthusiastic expression and posture, and kept her true feelings firmly under wraps.

She hadn’t been touched inappropriately. She’s always clung to that. She hadn’t. It was just what they had to do to make her up, or dress her. Just a fraction too… too close. That was all. The looks… had said something very unpleasant. The poses hadn’t quite been pornographic – but the props had certainly hinted at kink. Their eyes… the eyes had been coldly assessing, sizing her up as a piece of meat and then, as the shoot began, all too many of them very obviously turned on. Even now, she shudders at the memory.

She’d hated Vice, too, though at least on those operations there had been back-up and a proper purpose. It’s how she’d met O’Leary: undercover (she, not he: O’Leary is not exactly Vice op undercover material) and he’d bought the act and arrested her. At least that had let her get away from the kerb-crawlers.

She carries on down. Random dots appear: one colour for each victim. Carissa had been picked out for a wedding shoot: very romantic. Not. The real thing might be, but the shoot is just the same as any other shoot: do this, do that, pout, smile, look ecstatic; kiss the groom (that had been horrible. He’d tried to stick his tongue in her mouth and she’d had a really hard time not slapping him); look as if you can’t wait to fall into bed. Another version of sex sells.

It’s not that she doesn’t like sex – she does – but she likes it with people with whom she is in a good relationship. Not every random watcher measuring her up and giving her a score: using her image as a masturbation aid; selling the pictures of her body as an open invitation to lust. Not at seventeen, ever at all.

She forces her memories away, and goes back to her Pointillist map.

The map is, finally, done: bespattered with coloured dots, neatly joined up with thin coloured lines.
The only point of contact is the lingerie shoots that they had all done. Everything else is entirely disconnected. Beckett stares at it, trying to force a pattern from the random dots.

After a while, she becomes aware that Castle is peering over her shoulder. Since there is no coffee to tickle her nose, she hadn’t noticed, lost in the need to find something.

“Nothing?” he asks plaintively.

“Nope. Totally random. Just the same things we knew already.”

“Yeah. Avery got the San Francisco files and did the same thing. Wanna go see?”

Beckett pushes herself up from her desk without much enthusiasm and picks up her map to enter the FBI cave.

Avery’s map is as random as hers. The four San Francisco victims don’t seem to intersect – except at one point.

“What’s that?” she queries.

“Lingerie shoot.”

“Mine all did a lingerie shoot.”

“Did they?” Shaw asks sharply. The two women smile very edgily at each other. “That’s something to look at. Who was it for?”

“Coronal.”

“Mm. Avery?”

“Coronal.”

“That’s interesting, isn’t it?”

“Coronal has a very strong brand image. Everything has to fit into a pretty definite ‘look’,” Beckett notes. She stops. “The photographer would have to go along with that. Who was the photographer?”

Avery taps, and waits while the tech searches. “Dellings. Patrick Dellings.”

“Ugh. My photographer is Carter Connor.”

“Set the searches anyway,” Shaw orders. “There might be some connection. Same professional associations, same college, or any other connection.”

“Dresser,” Beckett adds. “Mine was Jose Caudillo.”

“Even an equipment supplier.” Shaw pauses. “Did we get anything more from the labs?”

“Not a lot. All of them were beaten and shot after death by overdose.”

“Okay,” Avery murmurs. “I think we could see if the heroin profile matches anything we know. Chemical signatures,” he adds, as if Beckett didn’t know that. She suppresses a growl.

Shaw hums to herself, thinking. “I wonder” –
“Destroying their beauty,” Castle jumps in.

“Yes, Mr Castle. Precisely.” She hums some more, and casts an assessing glance at Beckett. “I’d like to interview the agency – Selwyn. I want to understand him. Get him in here.”

“Least here he won’t make the same mistake as last time,” Castle mutters.


“He mistook us for the models. Mostly Beckett. And he said I had wrinkles,” Castle adds indignantly.

“Did he indeed?” Shaw says, not sympathetically. “I take it Detective Beckett corrected him about her occupation?”


Shaw hums some more. Castle suddenly has a horrible thought, and doesn’t stop it spilling out of his mouth.

“You’re not planning an undercover op, with Beckett as a model, are you?”

“I’m not ruling anything out,” Shaw says, which is not an answer at all, but from the set of her lips she’s not going to say anything else. Castle has a bad feeling about this, already, and it’s not even a hint of a plan, yet. He knows Beckett will do almost anything to catch the bad guy, and teaming her up with Shaw, who’s just as monoline, doesn’t exactly indicate that she will step back and let someone else take point.

As he traipses out of the conference room, he wonders if he’d be at all worried if he wasn’t sure that Beckett had had some bad experiences when modelling. She’d said all those eyes, and closed the subject down. He wonders if eyes had become hands, or worse. But she’d done Vice ops – she’d said, no, O’Leary had said, that’s how they’d met. Maybe O’Leary’ll tell him how she took them.

Beckett has told a couple of uniforms to haul Selwyn in, and is considering both Jose the dresser and Carter the photographer with some care. If she doesn’t see their resumes/list of jobs by lunchtime, they’ll both be back in here explaining why, to her this time, and then she’ll drag every last one out of them. If they moved off their shoot to the food truck outside she’ll want to know about it. Fortunately, at that point Jose’s list arrives. She bites the FBI bullet and sends it to Avery, along with the original four models’ booking lists, to allow him to build a composite map.

The break room is empty, and therefore quiet, while Beckett assembles her coffee. At least, it is for the first half minute. After that, Ryan sidles in.

“Beckett?” he mutters uncomfortably. She doesn’t turn round. She’s not in the mood for Ryan’s undoubted self-flagellation. He should have known better in the first place. So should Esposito.

Ryan watches her stiffly set shoulders and ramrod straight spine and quails. Beckett has never, ever been so angry with him, and he’s deeply worried that this time they’ve broken something he thought was unbreakable.

“Beckett,” he says again, a little louder. “I’m sorry.”

“Tell Castle. He’s the one who deserves your apology,” Beckett says to the coffee machine. “But
tell me, would you still have supported Esposito if he’d been faking evidence?"

“No! But Espo wouldn’t do that.”

“He thought it was fine to treat Castle like shit, though. He thought it was fine not to tell him the truth.”

“He didn’t lie to Castle.”

“No. But he sure didn’t have a truthful conversation either. Not with Castle and not with me. Even if he wouldn’t talk to Castle, he had no right to be pissed with him. I’m not interested in discussing it with either of you. You were both wrong, and you both screwed up, and I’m not going to make you feel better about it. I’m not listening to he made me do it. That’s for four-year olds. You should’ve manned up and done the right thing, not the easy one.”

The note of sheer disappointment in him underlying Beckett’s annoyance hits Ryan harder than even her earlier anger had.

“Beckett,” he says very uncertainly, “you wouldn’t really have one of us transferred, would you?”

Beckett turns round, full mug of coffee in her hand and a completely closed expression on her face. “Not for one mistake,” she says. “Next time, though, I won’t hesitate. I’m not working with people I don’t trust. LT would fit in just fine.” She walks out, leaving that hanging in the air.

Ryan despairingly makes himself a coffee. He’d rather add a stiff drink to it, because that didn’t sound good at all. He knows he should have done the right thing, not gone along with Espo, and now he’s deep in the shit.

Beckett goes back to her desk and flumps into her seat. She’d deliberately scared Ryan senseless, because this nonsense needs to be nipped in the bud, pronto. She’s very seriously displeased with both of them, but she wouldn’t go to Montgomery to change the team. However, if thinking that she might will scare them back into their senses, she’ll take that. What were they doing, treating Castle like that? Just because he doesn’t want to date her doesn’t mean the boys should treat him badly. It’s ridiculous.

Anyway, it won’t happen again. She and Castle are friends and it’s just fine that he doesn’t want to date her. Just. Fine.

So the boys can just back right off and butt out.
By close to lunchtime, Esposito hasn’t come near anyone else on the team. He’s been running phone records (the models’ files had all included contact numbers) and refused to take assistance from Avery. Avery, therefore, has run everyone else’s numbers in the same timescale and achieved rather more. Or rather, found more data which as yet makes no sense.

Shaw is in with Selwyn, and had refused Beckett’s company on the (entirely unreasonable) grounds that Beckett had terrified him so much that she, Shaw, won’t get a true impression. Beckett has therefore retreated to her desk to – well, *sulk*. She’d call it concentrating on the cases. At present she is concentrating on the San Francisco cases. Ryan has been handed the photographers, dressers, and other random components of a lingerie shoot. She’d had some amusement from his scarlet blushes at some of the photos.

Castle, on the other hand, has gone to watch Shaw interrogate Selwyn, and is parked in Observation. This is known to everyone within the bullpen with functional ears, since he had moderated neither his tone nor his disappointment at being banished to being a mere observer.

Castle being absent, Esposito crabs his way over to Beckett’s desk.

“Beckett?”

“Yes? Have you found a lead?”

“Er… no.”

“Mm?” It doesn’t sound encouraging. “What do you want?”

The flat question appears to have removed Esposito’s vocal cords. There is a moment of unpunctuated silence, then he finds words.

“I just had your back,” he says bitterly, “just like I always do. You had no right to rip me a new one. He was hurtin’ you and that’s not good for the team. He shoulda had more respect.”

“You ever think that there might be reasons you don’t know about? We had a misunderstanding. My fault as much as his. And anyway, since it had nothing to do with the job you were out of line interfering. You got my back on the job. Nowhere else. I’m not discussing this with you again, until you’ve mended matters.”

“I apologised.”

Beckett looks at Espo very straightly. “Really? Or did you force out an apology that you don’t mean so you could tell me you had?”

Esposito turns darkly red and departs forthwith. Beckett heaves a deep sigh, and wonders how best to knock sense through his stone head. Maybe…

“O’Leary?” she says.

“Yeah?”

“What’re you doing at lunchtime?”

“Eatin’ my daily elephant, so’s not to disappoint those Feds.”
Beckett blushes. “You heard that?”

“Well I did. You’ll be getting’ me sprayed with paint by PETA iffen you say that too much.” He grins, and his elephantine teeth gleam. “But it’s good for my rep, so we’re cool.” He saunters over. “What’s up?”

Beckett briefly explains the morning’s interactions. O’Leary rumbles wordlessly, deep in his barrel-chest.

“So you want me to put Espo on the mats a few times an’ make him see sense?”

“Pretty much.”

“Hmm. You think it’ll work?”

“I can’t think of anything else.”

O’Leary notices the unhappy set of Beckett’s shoulders and decides on a little more interference.

“Okay,” he agrees. “I’ll try’n let light into Espo’s head, but you gotta do somethin’ in return.”

“Yes?” Beckett queries very suspiciously.

“You gotta be nice to Castle.” O’Leary’s bass drops to an almost sub-sonic whisper. “I think he’s interested. I think you should give it a chance.”

“We talked about this, O’Leary. He wants to be pals. We talk about the cases. He even dropped by last night to talk about the case. It’s fine.”

O’Leary regards her sceptically. “If you say so,” he replies, and thinks to himself that it’s obviously not fine at all. Of course, he’s perfectly sure that Beckett’s lying to him, but he has some plans for that. He grins, where Beckett can’t see. He’s a bit big to play Cupid, but if it comes to it he can always pick them both up and bang their lips together. He returns to his own checking, in conjunction with Agent Avery, who seems like a pretty good guy for a Feeb.

Castle, perched in Observation, is becoming increasingly and uncomfortably suspicious that his comment about undercover operations starring Beckett-as-model is exactly what Jordan Shaw is planning. All her questioning is directed to how Selwyn sends out models’ resumes; how he places them; and most concerning and in fact very, very embarrassingly, why he had mistaken Beckett and Castle for his perfume shoot (this having been revealed in the discussion) pairing.

“The buyer wanted chemistry,” Selwyn says, “with an edge of conflict. And when they walked in that’s exactly what they exuded.”

“Mmm?” Shaw hums encouragingly. “Can you expand on what the brief was? Do you get that one often?”

“The scene we were shooting was an upscale bar – sort of place that sophisticated people go – but the models were to give the impression that they’d had an angry argument which they were going to resolve with – er…”

“Sex,” Shaw says very bluntly.

“Yeah.”

Castle can read Shaw’s thoughts like a book. They say I can see where you got that mistake from.
“It was exactly what we wanted, except they were a bit old, but actually I thought that might work better. Move the demographic a little, you know. I mean, he was pushing it a bit, but enough make-up would have covered that, and there’s a big female audience for that physique.” Selwyn doesn’t sound particularly impressed by that. “And like I said, the chemistry was there.”

“Okay,” Shaw says decisively. “Moving on. How do you get particular models on to particular shoots? All the victims were on a Coronal shoot. How’d you choose them?”

“Coronal are very specific. They want legs. Sexy legs, and a certain aura of rough and slightly kinky sex about to happen. So that’s what we picked. They like a spread of ethnicity – they’re pretty right-on about that – so that’s what I sent them. They like the same photographer – Carter gives them what they want. They’re selling for the sophisticated market too, not college co-eds.”

Castle stops listening. He’s less than impressed (again) by being regarded as old, but he’s very interested in the chemistry point. It implies that it goes both ways, which wasn’t exactly the impression Beckett had given last night. On the other hand, his suspicion of Shaw’s motives is on full alert.

He decamps back to Beckett’s desk, but on the way he is snagged by O’Leary as he’s detouring to avoid both Ryan and Esposito, who are clearly not in the mood for company, as Castle is likewise not in the mood for their company.

“I hear you run a lunch delivery service,” O’Leary smirks. “Seein’ as Beckett don’t provide my daily elephant” –

“Huh?” Castle says, confused.

“‘Cordin’ to her that’s what I eat – I thought we could go out an’ do the run for everyone.”

“No,” Castle says flatly. “You wanna feed Ryan and Esposito, you can. I’m not.”

“Didn’t expect you to say otherwise,” he drawls, “but thought I’d give it a go. Iffen that’s the case, let’s go get lunch for us, an’ everyone else can do their own thin’. C’mon.”

“O’Leary, it’s barely twelve. It’s not even lunchtime yet.”

“It is if you started at eight. Or seven-thirty, like your girl there does. When she’s running late.”

“I was here by nine,” Castle says indignantly.

“You were?” O’Leary drawls. “I din’t see you.”

Castle remembers where he was and shuts up, rather too late. Surprisingly, O’Leary doesn’t push for answers.

“C’mon. If you ain’t hungry yet, get somethin’ as’ll keep an hour.”

Clearly O’Leary is not going to take no for an answer, and since being frogmarched out is very detrimental to the dignity, Castle concedes.

“Beckett,” he says, wandering over to her desk under O’Leary’s watchfully amused gaze, “O’Leary and I are going to get lunch. Want me to bring you something back?”

“’S okay. I’ll want a break later. See you.”

“Looks like it’s just you ‘n’ me,” O’Leary rumbles happily. “Ain’t that cosy?”
“Leave him be, O'Leary. You’re taken.”

“Awwwww, you’re no fun.”

Beckett humphs gently and returns to her casework. Avery has spat out the data, but she’s trying to make some sense of it.

Castle squeezes into the elevator after O'Leary, who’s occupying around four-fifths of it without noticeably expanding his frame.

“I think Shaw’s plotting an undercover op,” he says bluntly to the mountain.

“Yeah?”

“I was listening to her with Selwyn, and I think she’s going to suggest that Beckett goes undercover as a model to try to trap this guy.”

“Makes sense.”

“Does it? She didn’t enjoy modelling. How’d she do on Vice ops?”

“You worried?”

Castle stops, and examines the other man’s face. He looks fairly sincere.

“Yes,” he says.


“Just…” Castle stops. He’d somehow gleaned the impression that modelling had left a deeper scar than she’d implied. “Just the way she talked about it, I thought something more was up.”

“She was okay in Vice, far as I know. But… there’s always back up. Watchers. And if they put hands on the decoys, they’re charged.”

Castle shrugs. “Maybe I got the wrong end of the stick.”

“You won’t stop her doing it, anyways. If it’s the way to catch the perp, she’ll do it.”

They step out into the May sunshine, and travel a few yards. O’Leary ambles. Castle requires a brisk stride to keep up.

“Wanted to talk to you.”

“Oh?” Castle says extremely uninvitingly.

“‘Bout Beckett.”

Castle says nothing, even more uninvitingly. O’Leary, being as big as a boulder and as unstoppable once started, ignores the lack of invitation.

“I told you she’s miserable. Well, she’s downright stuck on you only wantin’ to be friends, but I ain’t believin’ that from either of you.”

“I was over there last night and she only wanted to be friends.”
O’Leary sighs, which almost overturns a small, hairy dog and its elderly owner. “You two are as stupid as stumps. Just kiss her.”

“Do you want me shot?”

“Naw. But she ain’t gonna kiss you, an’ she might’ve walked out your loft without talkin’ to you – which was dumb – but you’re the one she heard sayin’ you didn’t wanna date her, which was just as dumb. Now,” O’Leary says over Castle’s irritated-tending-to-infuriated attempts to comment, “I guess that both of you were sore so both of you thought you’d be all don’t care about it, which is even more dumb, but hey, if dumb were a crime Leavenworth would be bigger ‘n’ Texas. But. She ain’t gonna kiss you an’ I think that’s the only way you’ll work it out.” He smiles, enormously. “You’ll both be a whole bunch happier iffen you just get it fixed.”

Castle is utterly silenced by O’Leary’s blunt words. Just kiss her? He supposes, very slowly, that this is a whole lot better than Esposito’s attitude, but he’s not inclined to take it on trust. His faith in Beckett’s team is not very solid, right now. He doesn’t say anything more all the way to the sandwich bar, and not much all the way back again.

O’Leary leaves his lunch on the desk he’s borrowing (he doesn’t like the chair. It’s far too small) and ambles over to Esposito’s desk.

“I need a workout,” he grins down. “You up for it?”

Esposito scowls blackly at him. “Sure I am. You ready to lose?”

“I’m gonna win.”

“My ass,” Esposito growls, but stands and follows him.

O’Leary grins around the bullpen. “Me ‘n’ Espo here are gonna have a match,” he announces. “Anyone wanna watch?” There’s a chorus of enthusiasm. It’s possible that small bets are already being exchanged as people follow. Even Avery struggles out of his data pit.

One of those people following, however, proves, rather too rapidly for anyone’s comfort, to be Captain Montgomery.

“What is going on here?” he demands to know.

“Er… Detective O’Leary and Detective Esposito are giving us a sparring demonstration,” the quick-thinking LT announces.

“Are they?” Montgomery says ominously. “Detective Beckett!”

“Yessir?” Beckett comes to attention.

“Did I not tell you not to let Detective O’Leary break any of my detectives?”

“Yes, sir, but he won’t break Esposito. It’s just a demonstration, and Espo’s good enough that nothing’s going to go wrong.” Esposito preens. O’Leary simply smiles knowingly.

“You’d better be right about that, Beckett. If there’s any breaking of my detectives to be done, I’ll do it.”

And on that note of vague menace Montgomery disappears into his office and the crowd of onlookers hurries after the mismatched pair of O’Leary and Esposito.
Castle manages to manoeuvre himself next to Beckett, so that he can obtain an explanation of what’s going on. He’s done a bit of boxing, but sparring isn’t his preference and he’s certainly not going to do anything that would stop him writing – such as damaging his hands. Besides which, he always used to sidle up as close as possible, and regardless of O’Leary’s commentary, which is no more palatable now than fifteen minutes ago, he can at least go back to normal.

“So what’s going to happen? What should I be looking for?” he asks interestedly.

“You could see if Espo lands a single hit that hurts,” Beckett suggests, rather nastily. “I’m not expecting it.”

“I thought you said Espo was really good?”

“I did, but look at them.”

Castle looks properly, and realises that Espo resembles a small stick insect next to the massive bulk and height of O’Leary. “Oh,” he says inadequately. “Are you sure Espo won’t get broken?” He manages to keep any note of hopefulness from that statement.

“Fairly,” says Beckett, which a week ago would not have been reassuring at all, but today only gives Castle a serves-him-right-if-it-does feeling. He’s not proud of it.

He doesn’t understand the technical parts of the sparring match, which is not at all like the boxing he had done. Fists are joined by feet, punches by throws, and holding is certainly allowed, preferably with tripping included. The Marquis of Queensberry would have had heart failure.

And, of course, Esposito is losing quite spectacularly badly, which isn’t – oh. How very strange. It isn’t going down as badly as Castle might have expected, given that O’Leary’s from another precinct and Esposito is one of their own. He wonders whether Esposito’s arguments with Ryan might be the cause of that. Ryan is pretty popular, and their current difficulties with each other haven’t exactly been disguised.

His thoughts are interrupted by a poke in the side.

“Shift over, Castle,” Beckett hisses. “You’re on top of me. A little space, please.”

“Don’t you like me on top of you?” Castle oozes, mouth and brain on autopilot.

Beckett doesn’t answer, simply taking a step away instead. It doesn’t improve Castle’s view of O’Leary’s latest interference.

Shortly, with Beckett still a critical six inches separated from him, Castle watches Esposito go down for a third time.

“Time to call it a day,” O’Leary says, to a muted round of applause. The bloodthirsty crowd depart, without blood being spilt. O’Leary hauls Esposito up in a comradely fashion, which doesn’t receive the grin expected. “What’s up?” Castle hears O’Leary rumble, and reckons that’s their cue to depart.

“C’mon, back to the grind,” Castle says to Beckett.

“I’m going out to get a sandwich.”

“Want some company?” Castle says lightly. “If I’m not sparring like that then I need to get exercise in other ways, and walking is good for me,” he adds piously.
Beckett sighs, but doesn’t say no. “Let’s go.”

“Good workout,” O’Leary says happily.

“Guess so,” Esposito grumps.

“Shakes the fidgets outta you.”

“Guess so.”

“Put a smile back on your face.”

Esposito’s limited patience with O’Leary’s hugely irritating folksiness spills over. “Enough with the Disney princess shit. If I want that I’ll listen to the other dumbass blow in.” He starts to stalk off. A huge hand lands on his shoulder and stops him.

“That ain’t nice, an’ it ain’t even true. That dumbass blow-in saved Beckett at least twice, way I heard it.”

“Yeah, from his own mouth.”

“I never met him till a week ago,” O’Leary growls in a resonant bass. “Beckett told me that. So you got that wrong. You got a lot of thin’s wrong, lately, ‘bout Beckett. Screwin’ up all over the place.”

“You got no right saying that,” Esposito counters. “I got Beckett’s back. You don’t. You ain’t even in her team.”

O’Leary simply gazes at him, for a moment. Esposito squirms. “I knew her long before you did, an’ you know what you just said ain’t true. But I can see you ain’t gonna see any sense at all, so I’m not wastin’ any more time on you.”

The ungentle paw on Esposito’s shoulder removes itself, and O’Leary’s titanic tread exits the locker room. Esposito stays put, enraged and absolutely infuriated that some oversized cop who doesn’t even know how Castle’s treated Beckett is getting in his face. Esposito is, in fact, completely ignoring that O’Leary’s just told him that Beckett talks to O’Leary, possibly because the idea that Beckett might talk to anyone is so improbable that he can’t comprehend it at all. He turns around and takes out his rage on the speed bag.

Beckett, having achieved lunch, and a relatively pleasant stroll to and from the sandwich bar with Castle, is in a hopeful mood. Surely they’ll find something (preferably ahead of the Feds) today? She goes back to the San Francisco Four, in which occupation she is fully engaged when there’s a whoop.


“Huh? What? Show me.”

“Look. They did the same courses, an’ they’re a member of all the same groups.”

“Are they?” Shaw says, appearing from the BatCave. Ryan keeps on talking to Beckett.

“So I cross-referenced. They’re the same guy.”
“What?” comes in sync from Beckett, Castle and Shaw. O’Leary ambles up to see what’s going on.

“Prints in the system. Had a bit of a wild past.”

Everyone looks at each other.

“That’s suggestive,” Castle says slowly.

“But hardly conclusive,” Shaw points out.

“Okay,” Beckett raps. “Let’s start digging him up. Agent Shaw, can Avery see if he can link this guy to anything he gets from overseas? Has he had the overseas info yet?”

“Still running,” Shaw admits, seeming rather displeased by that. “Europe’s closed. It’s after seven there. UK hasn’t answered.”

“Ryan,” Beckett says, “good work. Go turn this guy inside out – see if there are any more aliases lurking in his woodpile. I’m sure Avery will lend you his tech, and O’Leary’ll help.” She turns to Shaw. “Any chance you could get street cams of the last days the Stardance models were there? I’d like to see if there’s anything… I’ll check what their final jobs were, and whether Connor aka Dellings was the photographer. Just because they weren’t necessarily for Coronal doesn’t mean they weren’t his shoots.”

“Footage of the day that girl turned up dead on my patch would be good, too,” O’Leary adds.

“What do you want me to do?” Castle asks.

“Think up some stories,” Beckett says, already reaching for the job lists. “I need a theory to argue about. That’s your line. Though no aliens,” she says with a grin. “Alien abduction is not a viable theory.”

“What do I get if I get the story right?”

“Huh? Satisfaction at a job well done.”

“No prize?”

“No. I don’t get prizes so you don’t either.”

“I want a prize,” Castle says childishly.

“I’ll buy you a soda,” Beckett says, which finishes that argument.

Everyone peels off to get going on this new lead.
What a nasty ambition

When Esposito reappears, everyone is totally engrossed in their work. Beckett looks up after a moment or two, spots him, and summons him over.

“Espo, do your phone records include Connor, the photographer?”

“Yeah, why?”

“He’s the same guy as in San Francisco. We need to tear him apart. Can you get on to his phone and see if you can tie anything up with locations, odd calls, you know the drill.”

“Sure.”

Esposito and his black mood go back to his desk without acknowledging anyone other than Beckett, which does not go unmissed but which, in chasing a hot lead, goes uncondemned.

“I’ve got the foreign details,” Avery announces. “Someone must have been on the late shift. Another cluster in Paris.”

“Have you run his passport?”

“It’s searching. What’ve you got?”

“Connor was the photographer on the last job every model did. For Coronal.”

“Was he?” Shaw says. “Well, well, well. Now, putting that together with some of his history, he’s just leapt up my list.”

“History?” Beckett asks, a little edged. They should be getting that.

“We have better access than you. He wasn’t the most popular kid in school, but he was a pretty talented photographer even then, so he did all the prom photos. Didn’t get him a date with any of the queen bees, though. One or two of the shots were a little revealing, and somehow they ended up spread around.”

“Sounds a bit like revenge porn,” Castle says thoughtfully. “Or spoiling their beautiful reputations.”

“Very good, Mr Castle,” Shaw says. It’s the verbal equivalent of a pat on the head, and just as patronising. Castle bristles.

“So what’s the short version?” Beckett says, impatiently.

“If it is him, he’s escalating. Leaked photos in high school, picked up for being rough with a prostitute – twice – and now these clusters of deaths.” She frowns. “Whoever it is, we need to get them. They’re definitely escalating. The link seems to be beauty, but that won’t be all of it. There’s something more.”

Beckett remembers something. “Avery, did you trace the heroin?”

Avery smirks happily. “Yes. All four San Francisco women were overdosed with the same stuff. Unfortunately, it’s not the same signature as our four.” Everyone droops. “Our signature, though, matches one that was picked up from a dealer about five months ago, and he’s in Rikers.”
Beckett looks around, and spots Esposito. A nice hostile interrogation of a known bad guy always cheers him up, though she’s no idea who to send with him. He’s quarrelled with everyone, even O’Leary. She looks speculatively at Avery.

“Want to go see how we interrogate, Avery?” Shaw looks as if she’s about to say something. Beckett doesn’t let her. “You and Espo could go up to Rikers and have some fun.” Avery’s normally pale, bland face acquires a sparkle. It doesn’t look like he gets to go out often.

She clacks over to Esposito’s desk, speaks to him, speaks more firmly, and then gestures in a very final fashion. Esposito stomps over, jerks his head at Avery, and manages vocalisation.

“C’mon. Let’s get on to this dirtbag.” Avery scuttles after him: Esposito making no concessions at all. Beckett watches him leave with some concern, but eventually concludes that he’ll need to work through his bad mood. She’s not exactly sympathetic, since he brought it on himself.

The remains of the group return to their various investigative threads, and Shaw returns to her hi-tech den. An atmosphere of intense concentration and focused work permeates the bullpen.

Much later the group convenes again. Esposito and Avery are still not back, but that’s not much of a surprise. By the time they’d got there, got through all the formalities, done their interview and arrived back through the rush hour traffic, it’s an easy three to four hours, or the whole afternoon. While they’ve been away, Ryan’s picked up the phone records and street cams; Beckett has scowled in furious concentration at the San Francisco Four data; and Castle has happily scribbled as he contemplated ever more outlandish stories, all aided by copious quantities of coffee.

Everything is highly suspicious. Connor/Dellings is absolutely at the top of the suspect list, but everything’s circumstantial.

“Yo, Beckett,” Esposito announces, barely out of the elevator. “Dirtbag at Rikers wasn’t exactly helpful. Couldn’t say if the photo was our suspect or not.”

“But all his reactions and tells were that it was,” Avery adds. “He just wouldn’t say so.”

“Wanted a deal,” Esposito growls disgustedly. “Like hell.”

“So what do we got?” Beckett asks generally. “What’s the story?”

“It’s all around destroying something beautiful,” Castle says. “You” – he looks at Shaw – “assuming it’s this guy – said he started by destroying reputations, now he’s destroying health and actual physical beauty.”

“Yes,” Shaw agrees. “But if that’s the case, why’s it taking him so long? The models disappeared weeks before their bodies were found.”

“The Collector!” Castle says, which means nothing to anyone. He realises the silence around him is because he’s being obscure. “Book, by John Fowles, and a horror film.”

“Ah!” Shaw suddenly emits. “Very clever, Mr Castle.”

“An’ for the rest of us?” O’Leary rumbles, Ryan making assenting noises.

“Youngish lonely man stalks, drugs and kidnaps a beauty,” Shaw says briskly, though her face has twisted.

“Rape?” Beckett asks, her voice entirely controlled.
“Should have shown up on the ME reports,” Esposito points out, quite correctly.

“Er…” Castle says, obviously hating what he’s about to say, “if they were drugged to the gills, they might not have been able to struggle.”

There is an appalled silence.

“So there wouldn’t be – or was that why the bodies were beaten? Oh God.” Ryan is pale. “That would cover up any marks of a struggle.”

“If there were any,” Shaw says.

Beckett is already dialling. “Lanie, we need you to check those models again. Full rape kit. Fast as you can. I know you didn’t pick up anything first time round, but… even if it looks consensual it likely wasn’t, so we need you to have another look. Can you tell how long they’d been drugged?”

Everyone hears Lanie get it. She doesn’t need to use the phone to be audible. The commentary stops after a moment, and she recovers herself.

“Fast as I can, Kate. Seeya.”

Beckett swipes off. “Okay, that’s moving.” Her face, like Shaw’s, is locked down cold. If she’s thinking anything disturbing, she’s hiding it very well. “What more can we do tonight?”

“We can leave the searches running. I’m still waiting for his passport to ping – under either name.”

Castle looks at his watch. “I’ve got to go home,” he says. Truthfully, he thinks that nothing interesting is going to happen tonight, and while he and Beckett are getting on okay, the slight tension between them, his suspicion-tending-to-certainty that Shaw is plotting an undercover operation starring Beckett, and the watchful presence of O’Leary are not doing much for the retention of his smooth suavity. Besides which, he thinks that he should try, again, to find out what on earth his daughter had been thinking – or not – when she deliberately shut Beckett out.

“Okay,” Beckett acknowledges. “Night.”

Castle wanders off, pursued by variants on *goodnight*.

“So Connor was the photographer on the last shoot each of the Manhattan Four did, which was Coronal. What about San Francisco?”

“Same,” Avery says briefly.

“Did he shoot each of them more’n once?” O’Leary queries. “I mean, did he pick ‘em out instantly or after a bit of time?”

Shaw’s face flickers. It’s possibly as well Beckett can’t see her. She’s clearly plotting something.

“Ryan, Avery?” They jump to Beckett’s command. “Espo, can you get back to his phone? Your interview with that dealer’s been pretty helpful, so now let’s see if he was in this with anyone else or if it’s just him. Those guys who dumped the body for him… he must have found them somewhere. Maybe they tie up with the dealer.”

“Drugs?” Ryan says. “I could reach out to my old pals in Narcotics.”

“You and Espo sort it out between you,” Beckett orders. That’ll give them a chance to fix their differences. Maybe. They don’t look overly keen, but they slouch off together.
Beckett, O’Leary, Avery and Shaw spend a productive half hour rounding up all the lines of enquiry and working out where they are, after which Espo and Ryan rejoin them, add in the limited phone info and the matters they’ve asked Ryan’s old pals about. By the time they’ve knocked all that into some sort of shape (well, misshapen blob of data) it’s well after seven.

O’Leary casts Ryan and Esposito, who are just about on speaking terms again, a get-lost glare accompanied by a small flick of a finger in the vague direction of Beckett’s oblivious head. Fortunately, they take the hint, because O’Leary doesn’t think that another in-team argument is going to help anything.

“Time to call it a day,” Ryan says, and elbows Espo.

“Yup. I’m outta here.”

They both start to pack up. It doesn’t look as if they’re going to find some comforting beer together, but it also no longer looks as if they’re going to shoot each other. O’Leary and, separately, Beckett, both regard this as a win.

“C’mon, Beckett,” O’Leary says. She regards him balefully, and gestures at the papers on her desk. “They’ll wait an hour, or till tomorrow. Come ‘n’ get some food. You c’n get back to it after.” She looks irresolutely from his face to the papers and data. “C’mon. I’m hungry an’ I want my daily elephant.”

“You’re not going to drop that, are you?”


“You’re as bad as Castle,” Beckett mutters as the elevator descends. “He’s always trying to make sure I eat, even when I don’t want to.”

O’Leary waits till they’re outside and tending towards Remy’s before he answers. “He’s just tryin’ to look after you,” he says peaceably. “Someone’s gotta. Anyways, before you say anythin’, I don’t believe he just wants to be friends either. You pair are downright dumb. Don’t talk to each other, an’ both playing ‘s if you don’t care when you do. You should just kiss him.” Beckett emits a screech-squawk worthy of an infuriated ostrich. “Well, he ain’t gonna kiss you, is he? He don’t want a lawsuit. So you should.”

“O’Leary, butt out. This isn’t your business.”

O’Leary grins amiably at her. “Waaaaallll,” he drawls, “ain’t no-one else helpin’ you fix it. You two belong together. Just look at how cute you are solvin’ cases an’ thinkin’ the same thoughts.”

“If I want dumb romance I’ll go buy a ton of Harlequin books,” Beckett growls. “Drop it.”

“S funny, Castle said pretty much the same. Sulkin’ ain’t attractive.”

“Drop it,” Beckett grates.

O’Leary thinks he’s made his point, not least because Beckett’s fingers are twitching in a very where-is-my-gun kinda way. Maybe next week he’ll take on a new role. He hears that Dear Abby needs an assistant, and he’s pretty darn sure he could do it. Anyways, it’s dinner time.

Castle gets home to a familiar atmosphere of teen hostility and anger, even without Alexis being downstairs. Possibly she is upstairs because his mother is downstairs, sampling a glass of red and
contemplating a script. She doesn’t appear particularly pleased with life, either, though whether that’s because she’s getting in character or annoyed with real life is presently undetermined.

“Hey, Mother,” he attempts, hoping to get her attention.

“Richard! I didn’t hear you come in.”

“Lost in Miss Hannigan?”

“She’s not exactly sympathetic, kiddo. However, I can manage that quite easily, after the last week.”

Castle winces. That’s not even slightly coded.

“Pffft, it’s not your fault. I don’t know what’s gotten into her. I’d never have expected Alexis to be such a snob. How she could make dear Katherine” – Castle blinks – “feel so unwelcome I simply do not know. However, back to Miss Agatha Hannigan.” She breaks into a snatch of Little Girls, then follows up with Easy Street, all in a perfectly horribly accented, whisky-soaked low mezzo.

“Nice,” Castle says with admiration. “Must be all that time you spend knocking back my booze.”

“One should live one’s roles to the full,” Martha points out sententiously. “Everything is grist to my actor’s mill.”

“Mm,” Castle agrees. “So I’ve noticed.” He pours himself a glass of wine, tops up his mother’s glass and sits down, pondering.

“What’s up?”

“I just don’t think this is Alexis being snobbish. I’d have noticed. Hell, Mother, you’d have noticed. There’s got to be more to it than that, but she won’t tell me anything. If she’d just explain then I might understand, but right now all I see is that she deliberately drove Beckett off.” He sighs, and stares into his wine. “I don’t get where I went wrong. I really don’t get why she suddenly had such a problem with her when she was so keen to do her civics project at the precinct. That went really well. Beckett was really impressed with what she did.” He heaves another sigh. “That’s screwed, too. She didn’t say anything about Alexis, just apologised, said it wasn’t down to me, and she hadn’t realised.”

“She didn’t say anything more?”

“Nope. Not a single word.”

“Maybe she thinks it would be interfering,” Martha says, rather optimistically.

“No, I just think she’s written Alexis off as someone who behaves badly. I guess there won’t be any more help with civics projects or internships from anyone connected with Beckett’s team. She might not say anything, but she’ll be asked for a recommendation if Alexis applies, and I wouldn’t be giving one in this situation.”

“Would Katherine be that vindictive?” Martha asks, with delicate malice.

“No,” Castle says with conviction, “but truth has a nasty habit of coming out whether you want it to or not, and someone’s going to find out. Anyway, it’s pretty irrelevant right now, because Beckett’s decided it’s nothing to do with her. Hadn’t you noticed she hasn’t come here at all since she left? She just wants to be friends. Well, co-workers.”
“You did say she had a new boyfriend.”

“No. Well, yes, I said it, but he isn’t. He’s gay.”

Martha says nothing. She is, for example, not-saying I told you so. She is not-saying so why don’t you just get on and kiss her? She is also not-saying you’re being dumb, darling. It is therefore very odd that Castle can hear all three statements quite clearly.

“I guess you just keep showing up,” she finally says. “I can’t think of anything else.”

“What, Mother, your life coaching experience has failed you?” Castle says lightly.

“No, it was never intended to deal with two people as stubborn as you two,” she flips back. “Now, what culinary concoction are you preparing for dinner?”

“Salmon,” Castle says. “Though I was thinking of gruel and water, since the last comment I heard from Alexis was that I was treating her like a jailbird.”

“No, thank you,” Martha says. “Salmon will be perfect.”

Castle retrieves the salmon and efficiently seasons it and sets it cooking.

“And a nice salad. I hear you need plenty of vitamins” – he smirks evilly and starts to tear the lettuce – “as you get older.”

Martha huffs theatrically. “I knew there was a reason you were popping pills.”

Castle huffs back, and refills his wine glass, salad done. In a few moments dinner is ready.

“Alexis, dinner time,” he calls. There is no answer. However, heavy, sulky footsteps sound and thud on the stairs. Alexis sits at the table with a face of thunder, which is entirely unchanged from the expression she’s had since Saturday.

“How was school?”

“Fine.”

“Have you done your homework?”

“Yes.”

“Are you intending to tell your father why you behaved like you did?” Martha says sharply, tired of the stilted conversation after only two exchanges. “Or are you going to carry on insulting me by implying I’m not good enough for him?”

“I didn’t.”

“You did. We only ever eat organic,” Martha mimics devastatingly accurately. Alexis winces. “Some days we barely ate, never mind organic.”

“Mother…” Castle tries. It has as much effect as a single ant biting an elephant.

“Your father and I scraped by. That doesn’t make you better than us, it just makes you better off.” Alexis stares sulkily at her plate. “You don’t seem to realise how lucky you are.”

“Lucky? I’ve no phone and no laptop and Dad grounded me!”
“You could be homeless, penniless and hungry,” Martha snaps. “Like I was. You don’t even need to get a job. I was working in a diner from fourteen, after school. When I left home I did anything I had to in order to earn enough to rent a room and eat. I scrubbed floors and cleaned public toilets. You get violin lessons and anything you want. Your parent can help you. Mine couldn’t. Didn’t matter what they wanted to do, they didn’t have a cent to spare.” She takes a breath. “You’re lucky. Pray you never find out the hard way just how lucky.”

“Or like I was,” Castle says heavily. “Grams worked her butt off to make sure I got a start, but as soon as I graduated high school that had to stop. I worked dead-end jobs from fourteen too, and when I was eighteen I fitted them round college. You’ll never have to do that – so I thought. I’m rethinking that idea quite quickly right now.”

“So? She behaves like she’s better than anyone else. She bosses everyone around like she’s got the right to be in charge. She’s just a cop.”

“Just a cop?” Castle says quietly. “You think Beckett’s just a cop? You didn’t learn anything about her or her team during that civics project, did you?”

“Why should I? I was stuck in that boring little room with nothing but trash that people couldn’t be bothered to file properly the first time. I thought I’d get to learn something.”

“Didn’t you learn anything from finding that photo album and returning it?”

Alexis’s face flickers, and then returns to teen sulkiness. “Nothing I didn’t know. People like getting their stuff back. I didn’t need an archive to tell me that.”

“So you didn’t find out anything about the team.”

“They’re cops.”

Martha looks at Castle’s set face, and wonders just what he’s about to say.

“Cops. Just cops. Okay, let’s start with Esposito. Not exactly uptown, is he? Except he’s a decorated war veteran and a top class sniper.” Castle lets that sink in. “You don’t manage that if you’re dumb or a paper-pusher. Ryan. Soft as butter, isn’t he? Except he spent a year undercover for Narcotics risking his life every single moment to put a drugs gang away. He got commendations for that. They’ve done more than you ever knew, because you couldn’t be bothered to ask just cops about their backgrounds. You wrote them off as just cops. They’re as much heroes as anyone you’ve ever read about.”

Castle might be at odds with Ryan and Esposito but he’s not going to let his daughter’s petty, pathetic prejudices remain.

“And then there’s Beckett. According to you, she’s just a cop. You know she was at Stuyvesant?”

Alexis blinks. “Valedictorian. Scholarship to Stanford, and early entry into pre-law, with a minor in Russian. She’s fluent.”

“Stanford?” Martha says. “I thought it was NYU.”

“Stanford. She had to transfer to NYU to take care of her dad. Went to the Police Academy, and graduated top. Made Detective faster than any woman ever has: in fact, faster than anyone.” He looks at Alexis. “Still think she’s just a cop? She’s got the right to lead that team because she’s been a detective longer than the others – and if they respect her – remember? A decorated veteran and a man who lived undercover for a year – then you should damn well respect her too.”
Castle stands. “Dinner is over. I want you to think very carefully about what I’ve said. Nothing will change until you’re ready to explain your actions.”

Alexis stomps back upstairs without clearing up or comment. Castle doesn’t call her back to clear her dishes. It’s a fight he doesn’t need to have.

“Really?” Martha asks, clearly about Beckett’s achievements.

“Really.”

“No wonder she inspires you, kiddo.”
This would be the situation

Remy’s, surprisingly, is not busy. Unfortunately, this means that Beckett has nothing interesting to distract her from either O’Leary’s unwelcome and unusual pushiness, or from her own thoughts. She is especially unimpressed that, O’Leary having made his point, he is not relieving the quiet by talking to her about something else. Silly stories, or tales of Central Park. Hasn’t the National Enquirer reported black panthers in Central Park recently? Or was that aliens on the Empire State Building?

“Beckett!” O’Leary says with a slight note of impatience that indicates it’s not the first time he’s tried to get her attention. “Beckett, about the case.”

“Yeah?” she says, enthusiastic about anything that isn’t thinking about the mess with Castle.

“We” – uh-oh: who exactly is we? – “got the feelin’ that little agent’s plannin’ somethin’.”

“Yeah, so did I.”

“Waaaalll,” O’Leary drags out, “we thought it might be somethin’ like you goin’ undercover. Like you did in Vice.”

This does not come as a total shock to Beckett. She’s been half-expecting it since Shaw worked out that she’d been a model. It doesn’t mean that she likes the idea, though. “Ugh,” she emits gloomily. “That’s not going to be fun.”

“You’ve done Vice ops.”

“Yeah, and did you see me enjoying them?”

“Waal, no, but…”

“Modelling’s worse. Can’t put your back-up team round the set without tipping off our guy, either.”

“How’d you mean, worse?” O’Leary asks. Despite their – er – *difficult* initial meeting, even in the short time he’s known him O’Leary has developed some respect for Castle’s ability to pull something out of almost nothing, apparently on gut instinct. Since Castle had said he’d thought something more might have happened, O’Leary’s just going to do a little investigating, see if there’s something in it.

“Everyone on set’s looking at you. Judging, assessing – they can be as ugly as sin but if you’ve got the slightest flaw they’ll condemn you. And you have to be dressed” – aha, thinks O’Leary – “and made up, and they have to set the clothes just right for the scene. It’s all sex-sells, anyway.”

O’Leary, not stupid, draws some fast conclusions. “Bit handsy, is it?”

“Can be.” Beckett’s tone is closed.

“Hm. D’you wanna do this if Shaw suggests undercover?”

“Not much,” she replies dispiritedly, “but we gotta catch this guy.”

There is not a lot to be said about that, since it’s true.
“Okay. Mebbe we’ll come up with another way round it. ‘S been said I c’n dress well.”

“For what? The Bigfoot fashion parade?”

“Mean. Very mean. Just for that, I’m thinkin’ that we should put Ryan in as the dresser.”

Beckett splutters with laughter. “I don’t think they’re looking for sweater vests under suits.”

“Guess not. How about your boy? He cleans up pretty good.”

“He’s too old,” Beckett snickers. “Didn’t you hear about that? He was so insulted. It was really funny.”

“They said you were too old too, didn’t they?”

“Now who’s being mean?”

O’Leary grins evilly. “You’re thirty…”

“That’s not old,” she squawks indignantly. “You’re older than me.”

“I ain’t tryin’ to be a model, either.”

“I wouldn’t be, if I didn’t have to. You really think that’s Shaw’s plan too?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Damn. I hoped I was just being paranoid.”

“You’ll have back-up.”

“Yeah, sure. If the rest of the team can actually manage to talk to each other without fighting. Castle won’t speak to Espo and Ryan, Ryan can’t stop trying to apologise, Espo hates everyone, and we’ve gotta deal with the Feebs. Ugh,” she grumps again.

“Everyone’s my friend,” O’Leary says smugly.

“Only because you can pick them all up by the scruff of the neck like a litter of kittens.”


“I’m fine.”

“Yeah, right. Sure you are.”

“Not talking about this again, O’Leary.” Beckett drains her drink in a very end-of-evening way. “It’s time I went home, anyway.”

“Just think ‘bout it. ‘S all I’m sayin’.”

“You can stop saying it. You’ve said it lots. Enough. I got the point.”

Beckett arrives the next morning even more suspicious of Shaw’s motives than she had been yesterday, which is quite astonishing, since any normal cop couldn’t have matched her suspicion levels then. Coffee does not alleviate her concerns.

Ryan wanders in, goes straight for coffee and gulps it down, makes another and then brings that out. He’s still slurping at it when he sits up straight and stares at his screen.

“Beckett!” he calls. “Come ‘n’ see this.”

“Huh?”

“My pal got back to me. You’ll like it.”

“Yeah?” She arrives at his desk and reads down the report on screen. “Mm,” she says happily. “That’s helpful, isn’t it?”

“Oh, yeah,” Ryan agrees.

“So. Those two guys dumping bodies are definitely connected to the dealer. Your contact knows who they are, and he’s just checking up to make sure we won’t mess anything else up if we haul them in.”

“You got it.”

They grin at each other. “Nice work,” Beckett congratulates. “How’d they work it out, though? They were totally anonymised.”

“That was it. They’ve seen it a lot, and they can match build and height pretty accurately. Apparently they spotted something on the coveralls. But mostly it was the fake plates. They’ve seen them before. Lucky break.” He shrugs. “Does it matter, so long as someone got it?”

“Guess not. I’ll take it, any way it comes.” She swishes back to her desk, and tries to fit everything into place in a way that means they might not need a sting operation.

She hasn’t quite managed it by mid-morning, at which point she’s received Lanie’s data. It’s not pretty. It’s also not conclusive. It is possible that each girl has had sex recently. It’s not possible to say when, and the post-mortem beating has pretty effectively disguised any violence ante-mortem. On the other hand, it is possible to say that each girl had only been on heroin for two or three weeks, which is quite deeply suggestive.

“Yo, Beckett,” Esposito greets. “I went through those lists. The photographer shot some girls once and some a coupla times. No pattern.” Damn. That won’t help if Shaw’s planning something.

Coffee arrives in front of her, accompanied by Castle, who appears, upon examination, to be less cheerful and more tired than usual. Esposito departs in a strange mix of a scuttle and a stalk.

“Thanks. You okay?” she asks.

“Yeah. Writing late.”

Beckett is pretty sure that is a downright lie, but she isn’t going to call him on it. Instead she tells him where they’ve got to overnight.

“So I was right?” His face contorts. “Ugh.”

“Yeah.” She looks down at her papers, and back again. Her fingers slide across the desk, not
aiming for her coffee. They might have been aiming for Castle’s still hand, frozen on the edge of
the desk around his own go-cup.

Her fingers jerk back again as Shaw’s unwelcome tones slice the air.

“Detective Beckett. Can we have a word?”

Beckett trails into the BatCave followed, naturally, by Castle. Shaw regards him quizzically but
doesn’t comment. She does comment when O’Leary follows them in.

“I asked Detective Beckett to come in, not her watchdogs.”

confused.

“Tell you later,” she murmurs to O’Leary. Castle flicks her a mock-hurt glance.


“Right. I’ve spoken to Selwyn again. They have a Coronal shoot tomorrow.”

Beckett’s heart sinks.

“He’s agreed that you’ll be part of it.”

Beckett wonders bitterly what Shaw threatened Selwyn with, and whether she can trump it. On
balance, she thinks that the FBI likely have the bigger sticks. Or bigger swinging things that rhyme
with sticks.

“I always wanted to be a model,” O’Leary and Castle say almost simultaneously.

Shaw very slowly reviews them from head to toe, and then side to side. “Hardly model types,” she
says sardonically. “No. You are not going in as models.” She pauses. “You’re not going in at all.”

“What?” They’re still speaking in sync, but this time Beckett’s clear tones rise above both men.
“They’re not going in with me? What about the rest of my team?”

“No. Thanks to Nikki Heat and all the PR around the book launch last September/October, even
the dumbest photographer is going to realise who you are if Mr Castle is with you.”

“Selwyn didn’t,” Beckett points out.

“Timothy J. Selwyn is so far up his own ass that he wouldn’t recognise Naomi Campbell if she
walked in,” Shaw snaps. “Most people aren’t that self-absorbed. Mr Castle is not going in with
you.”

“Fine,” Beckett snaps back. “So lay out this” – Castle clearly hears the distaste underlying the note
of command – “plan. Though I think I got it.”

O’Leary backs very quietly towards the door. Amusing as the looming cat-fight might be, he
doesn’t want to be in range.

“Stay put!” Beckett raps.

Dammit, she noticed. O’Leary shuffles back in. Castle hasn’t moved a muscle, and is scowling
blackly at Shaw. Friends my ass, O’Leary thinks. If that’s friends, he and Pete are barely
“You want me to go in and model lingerie for the Coronal shoot.” Beckett’s tone could cut rock. “How are you going to convince Coronal of that?”

“They’ll do it.”

“Like hell. They use twenty-year olds, at most, not thirty.”

“If they don’t want the FBI digging into the exact ages of some of the models they’ve used, they’ll co-operate,” Shaw says in an equally cutting tone. “They’ve already agreed.”

“You’ve been busy,” Beckett says. It’s not a compliment.

“It’s tomorrow or wait a month,” Shaw says.

“Not much choice, then. Tomorrow. What’s the rest of the plan?”

“We put a tracker on you.”

“In you,” Avery corrects.

“What?”

“We inject a tiny tracker in your arm. It’ll look like the contraceptive implant. So we’ll be able to follow you wherever you go.” Avery looks at Castle’s pitch-black scowl and O’Leary’s impassive bulk. “That’s why we don’t need anyone inside with you.”

“So we want you to make sure the photographer picks you out.”

“Give him the come-on?” Beckett says coldly. Castle makes a strangulated noise which he entirely fails to turn into a cough. His hands clench into fists. “He’s interested in twenty-ish women. He’s not going to be interested in me.” Castle makes another strangulated noise, which might have indicated vehement disagreement.

“My profiling indicates that if he thinks you’re at all interested, he’ll go for it. It’s an easier pick-up than someone who doesn’t seem interested at all. You go with him. I’m speculating that he’ll spike your drink. Drink it anyway: we’ll be right on top of you so nothing will happen if he has. You don’t need to do anything more.”

“Nothing?”

“It’s all going to be in you pulling off the first part – the modelling and the getting him to pick you. That’s all we need.”

“And if he doesn’t?”

“If he doesn’t take anyone, we’ll get you into more shoots till he does.”

“Okay. I get it.” Her voice doesn’t falter and her stance doesn’t flinch. “I’d better go do some work.” She stalks out, head high, spine steely. Castle and O’Leary exchange glances.

“I wanna be in on it,” Castle says. Despite the wording, it’s not a request. It’s a statement of what will be.

“I’ll be wherever you need me, but I want in,” O’Leary adds.
Shaw regards them both assessingly. “This is my op. You will do what I tell you. If not, you won’t be there. Capisce?” They nod. “Good.” There is a pause. “We’re done for now.” They depart, hastily.

“This is goin’ to be int’restin’,” O’Leary comments.

“You don’t say.”

“Think she c’n do it?”

“Yeah. No doubt.”

“I think you’ll need to be there to pick up the pieces, after.”

“Uh?”

“Don’t think she was too keen on the modellin’ last time round. Said it could get a bit handsy.”

Castle’s first reaction is hurt that she’d told O’Leary that, when she hadn’t told him, followed by fury that any seventeen-year old should be molested. Consequently, he is in a fine temper when he crashes down next to Beckett’s desk. Since she is also in a fine temper, indicated by her icy demeanour, the conditions are ripe for war.

“What’s this about you modellin’?” Esposito storms over. “Why ain’t we involved? We’re your team.”

“Go ask Agent Shaw. It’s her operation. I just do as I’m told.”

“An’ she’s involving two blow-ins rather’n us?” he hisses. “That ain’t right.”

“Blow-ins?” Beckett grates. “Blow-ins? Is that what you think? I thought we had this discussion. Seems we need to have it again. Let’s be clear, Esposito. O’Leary had my back years before you did, and just ‘cause we’re in different precincts now doesn’t change that. I’m not making choices – yet – between you, but you’re the new kid on my block, compared to him. Castle’s not even a cop and he goes running into burning buildings and the bad guys shooting. You don’t get to shrug him off because he’s not a cop. Any of you could have my back.”

She stops. She hasn’t raised her voice beyond normal levels, but the concentrated ire and acid should blister concrete. Her knuckles are white and her face set.

“Up till five minutes ago, if this had been my op, which it isn’t, I’d have had all four of you on it. It’s up to Shaw who she includes, but if you can’t play nice with the others I’m not going to make suggestions.” She swallows down her fury. “You’re the only one who’s making this hard. All of you need to mend fences, but you’re the only one who keeps on quarrelling.” She stands. “I’m going out for a bit. Alone. When I get back you all need to have sorted your shit out, because I’m not having any more of this.”

She whips up her light jacket, phone and purse, and is gone in seconds, leaving a swirl of fury behind her.


“Like you were doin’ any better. You’re the one who kicked off.”

“Wanna explain that?” Castle bites out. “You’ve been hinting for weeks that I did something but
you’ve never had the guts to come out and say what it is.”

By now an interested audience of Ryan and O’Leary is not even pretending not to listen to the hissing argument.

“You strung her along an’ then shoved her out your loft an’ ditched her for that sleazy actress. Then you told Demming you didn’t wanna date her. Didn’t even tell her that yourself. Gutless.”

“Oh? You ever try and find out some facts? Or did you just make assumptions about me like you always do? Let’s have some truth, then. Beckett walked out my loft after a week without so much as a word of explanation, and treated me like she’d barely met me ever since. I don’t go where I’m not invited – do you?” Castle adds with a very nasty edge. “Is that what you like? – so I left her to it. I didn’t sleep with that actress either, but think what you want. Just remember that since Beckett walked out on me, no reason I shouldn’t have if I wanted. And why should I tell Demming I’ve got a claim when I didn’t, huh? Are you saying I should have stood in her way when she was looking him over?”

Esposito is silenced.

“Not so big-talking now, are you?” Castle stands up and looms over Esposito. “I’m going out. I can’t be bothered with your judgmental assumptions any more. You can explain to Shaw and Beckett. O’Leary’ll tell me everything I need to know.” He stalks out.

“You dumbass,” Ryan says. “Beckett’s already on edge an’ you’ve just made it worse. What’s with you these days?”

Esposito scowls. “Nothin’.”

“Bullshit,” Ryan says pungently. “Anyone’d think you wanted to date Beckett yourself.”

“Or Castle,” O’Leary puts in, very unhelpfully. Esposito’s scowl scorches his eyebrows.

“Fuck that. She’s like my sister.”

“Sounds to me like they both screwed up,” Ryan says. “You need to get your shit straight, Espo. Beckett can look after herself. She doesn’t need you getting in the mix.”

“He don’t treat her right.”

O’Leary has had enough. “They were both as dumb as each other,” he points out. “Blamin’ one is just stupid. Gettin’ involved is even stupider. You need to butt out, Espo, ‘cause all that’s gonna happen is that they both turn on you and you’re even further up shit creek than you already are. If you got Beckett’s back then pretty soon you’ll need to have Castle’s too. Stop bitchin’ about him. He’s a good guy an’ he don’t deserve it.”

“How’d you know?”

“’Cause I been Beckett’s pal since she was a rookie an’ I know what she ain’t sayin’. An’ just like I said, she told me about the life-savin’. An’ she sure didn’t tell me this mess was all his fault. So get your head outta your ass, Espo, if you want this team workin’, ‘cause seems to me that it needs all of you.”

“C’mon, Espo,” Ryan says, peace-making on full display. “This isn’t like you, so let’s fix it.”

“Kiss an’ make-up,” O’Leary says, trying to lighten the mood. “Startin’ right here with you two.”
Both of them glare at him. There is a moment of uncomfortable silence.

“Coffee, Espo?” Ryan says, tentatively.

“’Kay,” Espo replies.

O’Leary is not invited. He is supremely unworried by this, having plenty of friends of his own. One of those friends is currently wandering the streets, and will, he hopes, return with coffee, and if he’s really lucky, chocolate frosted doughnuts. One other (albeit a very new and tentative friend, though O’Leary’s sure he’ll be one shortly) is taking out an extremely bad mood on some other patch of Manhattan thoroughfare. At least, O’Leary hopes that it’s another patch of thoroughfare. He’d hate to have to arrest his pals.

Still, it sounds like Ryan and Espo are managin’ to have a sensible conversation. O’Leary grins a massive grin to himself, and ambles off to the BatCave to see what the two miniature agents have come up with.

He pokes his head through the door and finds Shaw busily arranging evidence and running her fingers through her badly disarranged hair. Avery is playing with a very small transmitter and an injection kit that looks like it was designed for brontosaurus. O’Leary wishes him joy of injecting Beckett with that.

“Anythin’ I can do?” he rumbles into the quiet room.

“Not right now,” Shaw says. “I’m evaluating the possibilities. I wish I knew where he might go, so we could stake it out in advance.”

“Yeah.” O’Leary pauses. “What’re you gonna do with Ryan an’ Esposito?”

“More back up. If I could predict where he’d go, they’d be there, waiting. As it is, we’ll have to rely on the transmitter.”

“So they are involved?”

“Sure. I just need to work it all out. They work together. You’ll be on your own. I’ll be with Mr Castle. I don’t think he’s going to gel with either of the others, is he?” Shaw’s expression indicates that she’s applied her profiling skills to the team, and found all the fractures. “Besides, if he looks like he’s going to do something dumb we’re enough to stop him. We can lock him in the van.”

She looks sardonically at him. “My previous experience of Mr Castle is that he is quite capable of doing something stupid. Heroic, but stupid. I prefer not to be standing over dead civilians. It’s frowned upon by the higher-ups.” She regards O’Leary dryly. “I’ll talk to you all as soon as I’ve cleared my head.”

He takes the dismissal as it’s meant and departs.
Beckett, thoroughly fed up of undercurrents in the so-called team and not at all happy about the undercover operation, takes herself out into the sunshine, stops briefly at a coffee bar, and ends up in Tompkins Square Park, which has the major advantages of being both close and, mid-morning on a Thursday, having no noticeable people milling around to disturb her black mood.

She is very deeply annoyed with Esposito. It’s not his business, as she has told him, and whatever may lie between herself and Castle, Espo has no right to take sides. They’re getting past it and settling back into friendship and banter. It’s just like it used to be.

It’s nothing like it used to be.

She ponders, sipping her coffee. O’Leary’s words creep back into her head, but she can’t bear to try that tack in case she’s pushed away. She couldn’t take being pushed away. Again, says a little voice in her head. She points out that it wasn’t Castle pushing her out of the loft. He didn’t notice, says the irritating little voice. Nor did I, she argues. And anyway, friends is a whole lot better than a week ago.

She doesn’t get Alexis’s actions at all. She’d thought that Alexis was a really good kid, and she’d been polite, helpful and useful on that civics week. Beckett had been happy to have her there, and she’d found the owner of the photo album, which had been excellent. So Beckett has absolutely no idea at all where that all went wrong. She’d thought she’d been quite clear that Alexis had done really well, and certainly her report back to the school had reflected it.

Well, she can’t fix that. She sips her coffee instead. The coffee is not disappointing. Not like everything else. She still doesn’t have half the furniture she needs, and she’s got no prospect of getting all of it in a hurry. She’ll go to GreenFlea on Sunday, and try for a coffee table and a small side table. Maybe even a lamp, if she really pushes the boat out. Her shoulders slump, as she remembers that she needs a gun safe, first. That’s not going to be cheap.

Bare bones apartment, bare bones life, bare bones relationship (ha!) with Castle. Even her corpses have a better fleshed out life than she does, right now.

And now she has to go undercover as a model, which brings back a whole series of skeletons from her cupboard. She is really, really not looking forward to this, but she hasn’t any other evidence to take down the photographer and prevent it. She loses herself in a morass of depressed, sludgy dislike of the prospect, incorporating the swamp of unpleasant memory.

She doesn’t look up when someone halts in front of her.

Castle had flung out of the precinct with a deep desire to go and punch things. Unfortunately, to do that would mean going home to change, and he doesn’t want to do that because he doesn’t like the miasma of hostility that coats the loft even when Alexis isn’t home. He compromises with a hot coffee and repairing to Tompkins Square Park, where he can contemplate the sunny day and try to calm down.

He is still totally pissed with Esposito. He’s not best pleased by O’Leary’s interference, but O’Leary doesn’t seem to have any ulterior motives, unless he’s pitching to be the next occupant of the Dear Abby column. And he is very, very worried about Shaw’s bright idea. He supposes that he could make up with Ryan, and actually, since he’s a fairly equable guy most of the time and he
does rather get where Ryan’s at – and Ryan’s obvious remorse doesn’t hurt either – he wouldn’t be averse to making an effort.

He feels a bit better for deciding that. Sure, he’d had every right to be mad, and he was. But he’s made his point, and Ryan’s accepted it, and it’s time to fix it. Not least because if this dim-witted insanity of an undercover operation is to work with least upset, the whole team needs to pull together.

He gulps down his coffee and marches through the park, trying to stomp out his general frustration. He can’t get O’Leary’s words out of his mind. Just kiss her. He’d love to, but he doesn’t think being slapped will improve anything, and Beckett isn’t giving him any clues at all about anything other than friends. He supposes friends is still a major improvement on a week ago.

He’s on the point of making an about-face and marching away when he spots a very familiar dark head and light blue jacket sitting, slumped unhappily, on a bench not ten feet away. Castle swiftly redirects his marching to come to a halt in front of Beckett.

She doesn’t look up.

“Hey,” he tries, somewhat uncertainly. It brings her head up, but her expression isn’t really an improvement. She simply looks miserable.

“Hey,” she says, no more certain than he.

“Fancy meeting you here?”

“Did you follow me?” she asks, an odd note in her voice.

“No. I just couldn’t stand Esposito any longer.”

“Oh,” she says, and relapses into muddy gloom.

“And I had no idea where you went, so I couldn’t have followed you.” Which has the huge advantages of not being a lie and also not giving any hostages to fortune.

“Oh,” she says again, a little brighter. She moves a short distance along the bench. “Care to join me?”

“If I’m not disturbing you.”

She casts him a half-quizzical glance. “You don’t usually worry about disturbing me,” she points out. “Anyway, you’re not.” She pats the patch of bench beside her. “Sit down. I’m getting a crick in my neck.”

Castle sits down. There is a short space of relatively comfortable quiet. “You okay?” he eventually asks.

“Fine,” Beckett starts, and then, much to his surprise, adds, “totally fed up with Espo, and I don’t like this op of Shaw’s much either.”

“Makes two of us,” Castle says gloomily. They both sip their coffee. “O’Leary said that modelling got a little touchy-feely,” he notes, very cautiously. “Are you sure you’re okay with this?”

“It’s the only way to get him,” Beckett points out, but Castle can hear strain and unhappiness in every syllable.
“So you’ll do it,” he states. Of course she will. Anything to get the bad guy. But she sounds so unhappy about it: not her normal happy ferocity at the thought of another collar, another perpetrator off the streets; that he can’t help sneaking an arm over the back of the bench, barely touching her slim shoulders, fingers only fractionally around her upper arm. He can sense tight knots in every tense muscle.

Surprisingly, she doesn’t say anything about his tepid attempt at comfort. More surprisingly, she moves a scant inch back towards him: not enough to tuck in, but enough to hint that comfort is not unwelcome. Minute as the movement is, it’s more positive than anything that she’s done or said or hinted at in weeks. He moves his arm very slightly to be a little more positive in its turn, and again there is no objection, but another very tiny move inward. In such infinitesimal increments, over several minutes, they end up, if not tucked together, certainly exceedingly close. Closer, in fact, than they have been at any time since Castle didn’t get to kiss her during the vampire case.

He stays still around her for a little time, neither of them speaking: somehow, here in the morning sun of a May day, recovering some of their connection in quiet, in comfort, in coffee and togetherness.

“I’ll be there,” he reassures her softly. “You won’t be on your own. We’ll all be there. It’ll be okay.”

“I know you will. But… it’s not going to be fun. It’s not even clothes. It’s lingerie, and that’s always worse.”

He hugs her, a little tighter, a little closer, a little more meaningfully, and drops a tiny, undemanding kiss on her hair, dark-spread over his arm, no intent behind it.

“I won’t even get to see you in it,” he teases, very gently. “None of us will.”

“You couldn’t cope with me in lingerie,” she snarks, just like she used to, and suddenly it seems like things are getting back to normal. It’s the first time she’s flirted in weeks.

“Oh, I think I could. I really do,” he flirts back, and lets some heat flow into his eyes and voice, the way he always used to when she snarked. “You can show me the photos after.”

“You couldn’t handle it,” she teases in return, and smirks at him, answering desire flickering in her face.

Castle’s arm clamps her in. “Oh, yes, I could.”

“You’d be frozen to the spot.” She turns towards him, face alive with mischief, lips a little parted.

“It’d be so hot I’d never freeze. I’d do this, instead,” and he bends down to kiss her properly. His coffee cup tumbles to the ground as his other hand cups her face.

O’Leary was right, they both think, before they stop thinking at all.

The kiss starts very gently: a slow flex of lips, a delicate slick of his tongue against her almost-closed mouth, ready to stop at the slightest hint of denial – and then she opens and her hands come up into his hair and around his neck and she’s invaded his mouth and pulled his head down and kissing Kate Beckett is magical.

She hadn’t expected it. But he’d been so tentatively careful and his arm around her had felt sonice and it had been just like it used to be – better than it used to be – so she’d snarked teasingly just like they always did, and suddenly he’d kissed her and oh God why did they never do this before?
He teased and she lit up and took his mouth but now he’s stolen hers and –

*Oh shit* they are in the middle of a public *park*! She pulls away.

Castle makes a very disappointed noise and doesn’t let go.

“We’re in public,” she hisses.

“Oh. Er… oops?”

Beckett stares at him, wide eyed and flustered. He reluctantly drops his hands, but makes up for it by twining his fingers into hers. She twines back, much to his relief.

“This is not a good plan,” she says.

“I think it is,” Castle contradicts. “I think it’s a very good plan and we should have done it months ago.”

“Kissing in a public *park* is not a good plan.”

“Oh. Um. Maybe not.”

Maybe not because kissing could so easily lead…elsewhere. Which in a public park might mean citation for public indecency.

“Come round tonight,” Beckett says decisively. “We need to talk about some things.” Her fingers close tightly over his. “A lot of things.” She stands up, and tugs him with her. “But right now we need to get back and I need to do some work.”

Castle produces a very tiny pout.

“We might come up with a way to avoid the undercover op.” All the tension slides back into her stance. “I really want to avoid that.”

“Okay,” he agrees, suddenly much more serious. “Let’s see if we can find a lead.”

They walk back together, fingers remaining locked until they exit the park, far too soon for Castle’s liking, and return to the bullpen in a state of general contentment that certainly doesn’t go unnoticed. O’Leary waggles his squirrel-tail eyebrows in a very *glad-you-took-my-advice* fashion, and then pursues Beckett into the break room.

“All fixed?” he asks in a happy bass. “Told you so.”

“Shut up, O’Leary,” Beckett snips, but her eyes sparkle and there’s a very thin line of colour in her cheeks as she makes her coffee. It’s gone before she leaves the room.

Castle makes a small but forceful gesture to Ryan, who trails after him to a conference room looking like he expects another fight.

“Yeah?” Ryan emits dismally.

“Er… look… Shaw’s plotting an undercover operation” –

“Couldn’t miss that. Espo yelled it all over the bullpen” –

“Yeah, well, we all need to work together – for Beckett – and, well, I get where you were. I don’t
“agree with what you did,” Castle says, rather parentally, “but, er, I think we should put it behind
us.” His stilted words stop. Ryan is staring at him as if he’d turned blue.

should’ve… anyway, I want us to be good again.” Castle nods. “An’ Beckett’s gonna need all of us
for this op.” Ryan refocuses. “D’you know what’s going down?”

“Not yet. The broad outline – Beckett goes in with some totally cool subcutaneous” – Ryan looks
slightly blank – “under the skin – transmitter, gives the photographer the come-on, we follow the
transmitter and pull her out as soon as enough’s happened to get him.”

“Enough’s happened?” Ryan says sharply.

“Shaw thinks he’ll spike her drink, and then take her to some hideout.” Castle grunts, unimpressed.
“And then we swoop in like the cavalry and save the day.”

“Ri-ight,” Ryan drags out. “That’s a lot of weight on that transmitter. Hope it’s unbreakable.”

Castle hopes so too. The thought of it going wrong is… well, unthinkable. “Yeah,” is all he says,
though.

“We’ll all be there,” Ryan points out. “And Beckett’s pretty tough, so she can take him down
herself if she has to.”

“Not if she’s doped.”

“She won’t drink that much. She’ll pretend to be out of it more than she is.”

Castle hopes so. Ryan seems happy enough – or at least not entirely unhappy – with the conclusion.
They wander out, more or less in charity with each other.

Beckett and O’Leary, currently discussing the possibilities for tracing the San Francisco heroin and
waiting for follow-up information from Paris on the French Four, look up, observe Castle and Ryan
on relatively good terms and grin at each other. O’Leary’s grin carries a lot of knowing mischief,
which Beckett ignores.

Beckett is entirely pleased to see Castle and Ryan back on terms again. So that’s four of them – but
Esposito is still the wild card. She foresees, without any pleasure at all, a discussion between
herself and Esposito in the very near future. She has no idea what to say that hasn’t already been
said. She parks the problem for now.

Shortly, Shaw summons them to the conference room to confirm the plan.

“Detective Beckett, we’ll inject this locator into your arm.”

Beckett looks at the size of the needle and considers fainting. Even a dinosaur would notice that,
and it barely has a brain.

“It’s good for four weeks, so there’s no chance of it running out of power. Its range is about twenty
miles, so unless you’re loaded into a plane we’ll be with you all the way.

Is that really supposed to be reassuring, Shaw? Beckett thinks. She hadn’t considered the
possibility of planes, till now.

“But since if you were loaded on to a plane we’d have plenty of time to stop it, I don’t think you
“There will be a voice transmitter in your ordinary clothes, as well.”

Beckett looks around. No-one else looks particularly happy.

“The shoot starts at ten, at Stardance. None of the four of you,” she looks around at the rest of the team, “will be allowed in. Detectives Esposito and Ryan, you will be in an unmarked car, ready to follow. We’ll provide you with a receiver. Detective O’Leary, you will be in another unmarked car, with another receiver. I want you all in a position to be able to enter any public or private place he takes Beckett into, so that if it really goes wrong you can get her out. That is,” she stares very hard at O’Leary’s massive bulk and set face, “a last resort. If we’re down to that, the chances of us taking the perpetrator down are very small.”

O’Leary nods, once. He does not appear very happy with that last point.

“What about me?” Castle asks.

“You are staying in the van with Avery and me,” Shaw says. There is a certain sense of so you don’t do something stupid, or possibly so you can’t mess this up by trying to protect Detective Beckett. “Everyone clear?” There are a series of nods. “Good. When we pinpoint the location, do not go in until I give the signal. I won’t wait for anything to go wrong. We need just enough to take this man down and put him away for a very long time. I don’t want him out on the street again.”

She looks each of the men in the eye. “I know you’ll all want to go in earlier. Don’t.”

Beckett pulls herself into line. “I agree with Shaw,” she says flatly. “It’s an operation. I know what I’m getting into and I am telling all of you to do as she says. This guy needs to go down, and if that means I have to put up with a bit of pawing then you damn well live with it. If I can do it, you can.”

Her tone brings everyone in the room to attention. There are various comments of Yes Beckett. Some of them might even not have been instinctive. The fact that she has no right except seniority to order anyone around makes no difference at all. Ryan and Esposito expect her to tell them what to do, O’Leary is sufficiently easy-going not to mind, and Castle has remembered that she invited him round tonight to talk about things. This op will, he will ensure, be one of those things.

Agent Avery simply looks embarrassed at his instinctive assent.

Everyone disperses. Well, nearly everyone.

“Detective Beckett,” Shaw says, “can you stay, please?” The courtesy doesn’t stop it being an order. “We need to get the locator into you so it settles before tomorrow.”

Avery shuts the door. “Roll your sleeve up,” he says. Beckett does, and keeps her eyes firmly away from the enormous bore of the needle. Avery dabs at her. “Numbing. It’ll help.”

“Can you do this?” Shaw asks bluntly.

“Yes,” Beckett replies equally bluntly. “I’d rather not, but… it’s the only way. We don’t have enough, otherwise – ow!”

“Done,” Avery says. “We’ll do the wire tomorrow.” Beckett glares at him. Her upper arm hurts, numbing agent or none.
“Okay,” Shaw says, ignoring the glare. “We’ll be with you all the way.”

“You’d better be,” Beckett mutters.
“What did they say?” Castle, O’Leary, Ryan and Esposito all ask, as Beckett grumps her way back to her desk.

“They just wanted to put the locator in without an audience,” she says, and displays the small lump to prove it. “Ow.”

“We can follow you wherever you go,” Castle says happily. “You’ll have no secrets from us.”

“If I catch any of you following me into the restrooms you won’t survive long enough to keep any secrets,” Beckett points out. “And this is why I’ll be taking the locators away from you as soon as it’s all over. The chip is coming out, too. I feel like a pet cat.”

Castle snickers. Someone murmurs meow, but when Beckett scowls round them no-one’s admitting to it.

“Okay,” she says, “let’s see if we can make it all irrelevant by finding something – and I don’t mean more corpses. Espo, let’s have a go at those phone records you were tearing to bits. We can spread them out on the other conference room table to get a better look.”

Esposito doesn’t exactly seem to be on board with the idea; however, he can’t say no without explaining why, and everyone is still gathered around and will be listening with interest: all of which had factored into Beckett’s timing. Mean, but effective. Espo goes to gather up his papers and transport them to the large table in the conference room, and everyone else, except Castle, disperses under Beckett’s general gaze.

“You don’t have to stay,” she says quietly. “Come round tonight, after eight. We can talk then.”

“I’ll go back over the French Four with O’Leary.” He glances up at her. “The loft… isn’t great right now.” Very swiftly, she swipes a fingertip over his hand.

“Okay. I need to deal with Esposito.” She swings off.

Castle wanders over to the desk that O’Leary’s borrowed, and peers over his shoulder at some chicken-scratchings that look as if Beckett made them, and a neat, roundish hand that must be O’Leary’s.


Castle makes sympathetic noises.

“But in other news,” O’Leary says happily, fortunately in an undertone, “looks to me like you an’ Beckett reached an understandin’?”

“We’re talking,” Castle says carefully.

“Mm. That what the cool kids call it these days?” Castle growls. “Glad to see you took my advice,” O’Leary adds, amiably – and very annoyingly. “Always happy to help out.”

“Shall we talk about these murders,” Castle asks, “or are you continuing your Dear Prudence imitation?”

O’Leary laughs, and turns to the papers, making sure a cup which is suddenly wobbling alarmingly
doesn’t tip over.

“So what do we got here?”

“He was calling the dealer a lot. Guess that was arranging for the disposal team, ’cause the dates and times tie up pretty much exactly. Funny thing is, that about the time each of the girls disappear, he makes a series of calls to the same number – see?” – Esposito points it out – “but it ain’t the dealer an’ I haven’t got a trace on it yet. I’m thinking it’s a burner.”

“Did you ask Avery? They’ve got faster ways than we do.”

“Naw.”

“I think we need to. We don’t need to get any surprises tomorrow. If there’s someone else in this, let’s find out now. I really, really don’t want to find that the photographer’s one of a gang.” She shivers.

“Okay.” Espo doesn’t sound wholly enthusiastic.

“I need to know that all four of you are on the same team. If something odd goes down, you’re the guys I trust to get me out of it before the shit hits the fan. Not the Feebs, you four.” There is an emphasis on four. “I don’t want to be worrying about some fight about whose is biggest or who knew me longest. I gotta concentrate on the role. You guys gotta concentrate on having my back.”

Beckett’s confidential, you-got-my-back tone and words get through to Espo.

“I won’t fuck this up,” he promises. “I got your back same as always.”

“Okay,” she says. “Let’s do this.” She bumps fists with him, which she almost never does, and he leaves, aiming for Avery’s tech den.

Beckett sighs. She’s still got to fix it between Espo and Castle, but that’s an argument for another day. She just needs this held together for long enough to get through tomorrow. And now there’s the wild card of this other number. That really worries her, because it’s a new and dangerously unknown variable. From the corner of her eye, she can see Esposito entering the FBI room, and then gesturing at his phone logs. Avery gestures in return, and their heads bend together. She turns away, satisfied.

“Lunch, Beckett?” Castle asks, as she’s running through the footage that Ryan had reduced to the key times.

“Can’t. We need to get this done,” she says a little ruefully.

“I’ll go get something for you.”

“Could you include Ryan and Espo? And O’Leary?” Castle looks mulish. “Look, they were out of line, and I told them so. But I don’t need for all of you to be on the outs tomorrow. I need to know you’re all on the same page. You know that. I need you all to have my back.” She glances up at him: her eyes almost desperate. “I can’t be worrying about you four. I need to be completely in it. No distractions. You” – there’s emphasis on the word which confines it to Castle himself – “can make that happen.”

Castle hears what she isn’t saying. I need you to fix this because I have no headspace for it. I’m going to need all of my control to get through this shoot.

“Sounds great.” She raises a faint, tense smile. “Don’t forget the elephant dumplings for O’Leary.”

“Hey! I heard that,” O’Leary complains.

“You were meant to,” Beckett smirks, but it doesn’t carry any sardonic weight.

Castle slips a finger over her hand, as lightly as she had done with him, earlier. It’s meant as reassurance, but he isn’t sure that her chill flesh is warmed in any way by the gesture.

Dim sum, when he returns, certainly helps with the team’s re-establishment, and even brings the two FBI agents into a form of bonding. Weak bonding, to be sure, but bonding.

By the end of the afternoon, all of Espo’s efforts with Avery have failed to establish the owner of the unknown number, which has resulted in a gripping worry in Beckett’s gut. She hasn’t found anything else that would get her out of modelling, either. Another gripe. She’s sure she’s getting an ulcer. Everyone’s worried about this wild card, but nobody has a good lead or any way to find one. They can’t drop the shoot — that would tip off the photographer. All they can do is stick to the plan and hope like hell that nothing goes spectacularly wrong.

She wanders in the general direction of the break room, searching out coffee to fuel the evening’s work, and is interrupted.

“Okay, Detective Beckett, your day is over. I want you to go home and get a good night’s sleep. You need to look the part tomorrow.” Shaw, Beckett remembers, is a mother. She certainly has the instructional tone down pat. She probably uses that one on her child, but Beckett doesn’t think it’s appropriate to use it on a fellow professional. Her look says so, very loudly, and has no effect whatsoever on Shaw. “We can’t do anything more tonight. We’ll be ready to wire you up at eight tomorrow.”

Beckett trails back to her desk, packs up and trails out. No-one follows her: Ryan and Esposito because they’re still chasing down the phone records to see if they can find the unknown number before tomorrow; O’Leary because he’s still concentrating on the French and San Francisco Fours to try to find anything that will assist either in running the phone records or indeed anything else that pops relating to any aspect of the case; and Castle because he’s going to see Beckett later anyway. An atmosphere of hard-working glumness descends on the bullpen.

Beckett makes herself a comfort-food dinner of mac-n-cheese followed by ice-cream, untainted by considerations of healthy eating and accompanied by her strongest coffee.

She really, really does not like the thought of tomorrow. She puts the dishes in the sink to soak, curls into a corner of her couch, and starts to think through the likely possibilities.

First up, she has to act as if she’s a model, who needs to play nice in order to get the next gig. She absolutely cannot behave as Detective Beckett, scourge of slackers and suspects. She can’t turn any handsy dressers or make-up artists or photographers into ash with hard stares and harsher words, nor can she arrest them there and then. She will have to put up with it all, and pretend it’s all okay.

She’s spent eight years in the NYPD, first learning how to project and then projecting authority and command: before that she was used to being confident, self-assured and front of stage. Being meek and mild is not at all her modus operandi, and now it runs directly counter to everything she is.
Secondly, it’s lingerie. Beckett likes lingerie, though she can’t afford Coronal. However, liking wearing lingerie for one’s own pleasure and comfort is very, very different from modelling it. She’s seen the Coronal adverts, and they’re… well, pretty overtly sexual. All those assessing eyes, and unpleasant overtones of arousal. Even the thought of the likely props makes her cringe, and the sets and positioning isn’t doing much for her either.

But. But this guy needs taken down. It’s likely that he’s killed twelve models, or been complicit in it, and they simply have to get him before he murders any more. And she can do this. She’s thirty, not seventeen, and she can do whatever it takes to get this guy.

She just wishes that she didn’t have a crawling feeling of discomfort that there’s something here that they don’t yet get. Maybe when Castle arrives they can pin it down. He’s late, and that’s not helping her nerves either. An off-the-wall idea might shake something loose, right now; which would be good, because all the ideas she has had are very, very, bad. She’s been watching far too much Criminal Minds. Or maybe it’s having Shaw around. Shaw raises Beckett’s hackles without even trying, so maybe that’s the issue.

At which point, the door finally sounds, and Castle appears. He is not in a happy state.

Castle had trudged home without any particular enjoyment, knowing that he needs to make another attempt at finding out what Alexis’s problem with Beckett actually is. He’s the parent here, and while that means appropriate consequences for bad behaviour and discipline it also means finding the underlying reasons for such a completely out-of-character action. He hasn’t done too well in investigating those yet.

His mother is not in evidence. Small noises from upstairs could be either his mother or Alexis: he’s not sure which. He mounts the stairs to find that it is both, very distinctly separated. The temperature of the upper floor is around ten degrees cooler, metaphorically, than downstairs. He concludes that there has been no miraculous resolution during the course of the day.

“Alexis,” he says, and taps on her door.

“Yeah?” Her reply is forbiddingly uninviting, but he enters anyway and sits down.

“We need to talk about this. I don’t understand why you behaved the way you did, and I can’t believe there isn’t more to it than you’ve said. What’s wrong, pumpkin?” He’s doing his level best to be sympathetic and understanding.

“She’s got no right to force you to let her stay here and put us all in danger.”

“She didn’t,” Castle begins, and is run right over.

“She just acts like she’s got the right to be in charge and boss everyone around. She treats you and everyone else like she knows it all and they have to do what she says. She’s got no right.”

“That’s not true, Alexis,” Castle says. “I explained. She has the right. She’s been a homicide detective longer than the other two, so she’s senior.”

Alexis entirely ignores that.

“Now she makes you let her stay here and risk us all getting blown up. She’s got no right to do that either.”

“Of course I care about you and Grams. If there had been any risk I wouldn’t have invited
Detective Beckett to stay here. But you need to know that she didn’t ask. I offered, and she turned me down. In fact, she only came because Captain Montgomery ordered her to come here. Why did you think she asked to come here?”

Alexis turns an unpleasant shade of red, and doesn’t answer. Castle applies his mind as the uncomfortable silence extends.

“Did someone at school say something?” he suddenly asks. A whole bunch of possibilities are suddenly occurring to him, none of which he appreciates. It’s not as if he’s unfamiliar with the predatory tendencies of divorcees with money, or indeed divorcees looking for a new meal ticket. “Can’t be Paige, because Lena and Charles are sound. So, Alexis, who told you that Beckett was trying to land me?”

From the violent colour of her face, to the shocked jerk as he’d said it, Castle is now convinced that someone had told Alexis that Beckett was setting her cap for him. (If only, he thinks. Life would be much easier if that were the case.)

“It was obvious,” she bursts out. “Everyone knew. It was in the papers and you were on page six and you were even in Cosmopolitan! She couldn’t have been clearer.”

Alexis, now the floodgates have opened, is quite incapable of stopping. All her previous apparent maturity has slid off and a vast sea of insecurity has been revealed.

“She just waltzed in, clicked her fingers and you went chasing after her like a puppy hoping she’ll be wife number three, and she played you for a fool all the time: blowing hot and cold and playing hard to get just so you’d do anything she wanted. So I stopped it.”

“You stopped it,” Castle says, very slowly. “You were jealous and upset, so instead of talking to me, or Grams, you decided to stop it.” He stops, and looks her full in the face. “Why couldn’t you just talk to me?” he says quietly. “I thought you could talk to me about anything.”

“You wouldn’t have listened,” Alexis says bitterly. “You’ve trailed round after her no matter what she’s done to you. You even went back after she threw you out. You won’t look after yourself so I did. She’s no good for you. You spend all your time playing at being a cop and not caring about your family. It’s worse than Gina, because at least then you were still at home and my Dad.”

“There’ve been all sorts of dumb rumours before, though, and you’ve always talked to me. Why not this time? I could have told you” –

“Because this time it’s true! She’s your muse. She’s got everything: she’s successful and clever and confident and everything that Mom isn’t” – Alexis stops.

“What’s your mother got to do with this?” Alexis turns her back on Castle and hunches silently into herself. “Alexis, why are you comparing Beckett with your mother?”

Another pained silence stretches out, and finally snaps.

“She’s everything that Mom isn’t,” Alexis says miserably, “and she’s so successful and rubs it in all the time.”

“Rubs it in?” Castle asks. “But you never see her. You did that civics project, and that was it. How is she rubbing it in?”

“You’re always there and you talk about her all the time and when I was doing the project everyone told me how lucky I was that I knew her and how impressive she was and all about her
history and how she’s a shining example and it’s totally intimidating and” –

“And did Detective Beckett say any of this?” Because if she did he is going to have words with her about upsetting Alexis. A lot of very harsh words.

There is another noticeable pause. “Alexis?” He has a horrible thought. “Alexis, don’t lie again. Did Detective Beckett ever mention any of this?”

“No,” she says sulkily. Castle thinks that if she’d thought he wouldn’t notice, she might well have lied about that too, and he’d have gone racing off to berate Beckett and it would all have gone horribly wrong again for exactly the same reason as the last time.

“So it wasn’t her who was rubbing it in.”

“Might as well have been.”

“But it wasn’t, was it?”

Alexis retreats into mutinous silence. Castle looks despairingly at the back of her red head.

“Pumpkin, why are you so upset by all of this? I don’t want you to be upset, but you can’t just behave like this and be rude and nasty to Grams and me. You’re not my parent and you don’t get to put limits on what I do. I want to understand, but you’re not giving me anything to work with here. I can’t help you fix it if you won’t talk to me.”

“You can’t fix it anyway,” Alexis bites back. “You’ll never give up playing at being a cop so you can’t fix it.”

“You want me to stop going to the Twelfth?”

“I want you to stop following Detective Beckett around and be my Dad.”

Castle stares at her, aghast. There is only one answer to that.

“No.”

Alexis bursts into furious, violent tears. “You have to. You have to stop. I don’t want her here being so perfect when I don’t even have a mother who cares let alone who’s actually good at anything except cheating and spending other people’s money.”

“So that’s what this is really about,” Castle says heavily, after a very long pause to stop himself saying something utterly unforgivably stupid. He stands up, considers his extremely limited options, and tries to hug his daughter. She is entirely unresponsive. “Let’s talk about this more tomorrow.”

“No, we won’t,” Alexis fires back. “If you won’t stop following her there’s no point.”

“I already said I’m not going to do that. You don’t get to try to control me.” He takes a breath, to try to calm down. “I’m not going to discuss this any more tonight. I’ll see you at breakfast.”

He closes Alexis’s door very quietly and carefully behind himself, goes downstairs, and leaves. He’s already later than he’d vaguely agreed with Beckett, but he wouldn’t have cared at all about that if he had been able to resolve Alexis’s problems: he’d just have called her and explained. Instead the mess is even worse.
Castle knocks on Beckett’s door no closer to any idea of how to solve the problem of his daughter than he had been when he left the loft.

“Hey,” she says to him, seeming no more connected to any enthusiasm or happiness for anything than he is. This is already looking like an even less fun evening than he’s already had. Beckett’s depressingly under-furnished apartment isn’t welcoming in any respect. Considering that she invited him, based on an – er – interaction which was exceedingly welcoming, this is both disappointing and annoying.

“Coffee?” she asks.

“Sure.”

Beckett trails over to the kitchen area to make it. Castle, in default of any better idea, trails after her.

“Creamer?”

“Please.”

Coffee happens. They sit down at opposite ends of the couch. Castle almost drops his coffee, expecting a table and forgetting that it doesn’t yet exist.

“I’m getting one Sunday.”

“Huh?”

“Getting a table. On Sunday.” She stops. “If I can find one I like. I need a gun safe, too.”

Castle seizes upon the neutral topic. “Where will you put it?”

“The safe? In my bedroom.” She sighs.

“Why the sigh?”

“It’s just another thing to think about. I don’t want to spend Sunday bargain hunting at GreenFlea, but I’ll have to. If something breaks on the case and it spills over, I’ll miss it for another week. I’ll probably order the safe on-line. I’m on shift Saturday.”

She sounds so depressed, Castle can’t help making the next comment. “If you needed someone to wait for the delivery, I could. If you were on shift.”

Her eyes widen. “But… I couldn’t ask you.”

“You didn’t ask, I offered.” He leaves it at that. Beckett is looking boggled. “I could come round with you and carry the table.”

“I can manage the table.” But she sounds far more surprised than snippy.

“C’mon. You’re depriving me of an opportunity to show off my muscular strength. That’s not fair.”
“I’m depriving you of an opportunity to knock passers-by out cold when you swing round without thinking. Unless you want to be arrested? The cells up that way aren’t any nicer than ours.”

Castle pouts. “I wouldn’t,” he says. “I’d be very careful.”

“It’s sweet of you, but it’s okay. I can manage.”

“Yeah. You always do,” Castle says, more bitterly than he had intended. Beckett doesn’t say anything. “I only wanted to help, but you never need any help.”

“I did need your help, and I took it, and all that happened was that your daughter lost it. I’m not getting between her and you again.” She starts to stand up.

“It’s not up to her,” Castle bites out. “She’s not the boss of me. If I want to help you I’m not letting her stop me.”

Beckett halts in her rise from the couch and drops back down. “That why you’re later than you thought?”

“Yeah.”

“Oh,” she says, comprehension shading her voice. “Wanna talk about it?”

“No. I’m not discussing Alexis.”

“Okay.” But her voice has turned cool and closed. “Want to help me work out how tomorrow’s going to go?” Beckett’s phrasing is deliberate and careful. There is a very slight stress on help.

“Yes.” Castle thinks that it’s a better option than discussing his daughter’s statements, which are very unlikely to improve the chances of avoiding the fight that he and Beckett are just about not having, though it’s looming very large about them.

“It’s going to be awful,” she says bleakly.

Castle finds some of his earlier sympathy. “Why’re you so wound up about it? You could take any of them down with one little finger.”

“Yeah, but I can’t. The moment I step out of character the whole op is blown. I can’t do anything.” She lifts her pained eyes. “Something’s off. That unknown number is spooking me. There’s something we don’t know yet. And I can’t do anything. I have to stand there and pretend I’m enjoying it. Whatever it is.”

“O’Leary said the shoot might get a bit handsy,” Castle ventures. Beckett shudders. “We’ll have your back.”

“You won’t be the one getting felt up, will you?” she says bitterly.

“No, I guess not. So how can I help?”

“I don’t know. Don’t you have a theory about the unknown number, or the photographer, or anything? You’ve always got a theory.”

Castle glances piercingly at her. “You’ve thought of something, haven’t you?” he says quietly. Much suddenly becomes clear to him. She’s scared. She’s never scared, but now she is, and... “You’ve thought of something,” he tries, “and you really don’t like it. You want me to think of something more reassuring.” He slides a measured space closer. “What are you thinking?”
She fails to meet his eyes.

“Oh,” he realises. “You think he’s not working alone. Not the Collector, but the assistant to a collector.” He shudders. “Ugh,” and slides another distance nearer. There’s not much distance left, really.

When she tries to turn away he leaves her no distance at all. His arm settles very gently around her shoulders. She’s not exactly softening into it, though.

“We’ll be tracking you all the way.” It doesn’t help. “You know I’d be in there too, if I could be.”

“Yeah.” Abruptly, she turns away from him. “I know. You all would be.”

“I don’t think any of the others are model material,” he smirks, trying desperately to lighten the mood. “I was.”

“You were too old,” she snips on autopilot.

“They were going to go for it. Me. Us. Anyway, that wasn’t what you thought earlier today. Which was why you invited me over. You said we needed to talk about some things, and I didn’t think you meant tomorrow’s undercover op.”

“I didn’t,” Beckett says, still looking anywhere but at him. “But…”

“Mm?” he hums, much more interested in the unusual and much longed-for feeling of Beckett in the crook of his arm. A second later his happy feeling crumbles.

“But you don’t want to talk,” she rushes out.

“Uh?”

“You don’t want to talk about Alexis, so it’s not going to happen. So we might as well talk about the op, because at least we might get somewhere with that.” She moves away from him. Castle doesn’t like that, and tugs. She stays firmly separated.

“What’s Alexis got to do with any of this?”

“It’s what screwed it all up in the first place.” Beckett swallows. “I…” she starts, and stops. She stands up, separating herself even further. “It doesn’t matter,” she says to the empty air and darkness outside. “It doesn’t matter right now. Let’s just talk about tomorrow.”

“You what? What were you going to say?”

“Nothing important. It’s fine. Let’s just get through tomorrow.”

“See, you’re doing it again. I could help but you won’t let me and you won’t even talk to me about it. You wouldn’t talk last time either.”

“You can’t help because you already said you didn’t want to talk about Alexis and there’s no point me talking about it because it all starts with Alexis. It’s you who’s blocking it. Not me.” She stops her rising tone. “Anyway, it’s not important.”

“Not important? It is important.”

“Not important enough to talk about, though.” She stares out of the window. “This was a stupid idea. Let’s just forget it. Just be friends.” He barely hears the next words. “At least that still
works.”

“You invited me over to talk,” Castle says, totally exasperated, “and now you won’t. It’s just the same old dance, over and over. Just tell me your side without shutting down.”

“Okay,” Beckett bites out. “Then I’ll talk. Whether you like it or not, I’ll talk.” She doesn’t come near the couch. Castle doesn’t move. The harsh glare of the overhead light sharpens both their faces.

“I wasn’t going to stay at yours, because Dunn was still after me. But you and Montgomery made it happen, and you… well. I thought we might… anyway. Your family made it perfectly clear that I wasn’t up to scratch, so I moved out. You didn’t seem to care.” She gulps in air. She hasn’t turned to look at him since she began. “So when Demming was interested, why shouldn’t I take a look? You weren’t. You’d made that perfectly clear right from the moment I walked into your loft. And then you told him that you weren’t.” She gulps again. “I heard you.”

Castle winces, unseen by Beckett.

“I heard you two trading me off like a doll,” she says very coldly. Under the ice is a deep layer of hurt. “You said you weren’t interested. What was I supposed to think?” She’s silent for a moment. “And then you said it was all Alexis deliberately making sure we never got a chance to talk and pushing me out. So, fine. We’re friends again. It’s what you said you wanted.”

“I thought you were dating O’Leary,” Castle spits out, unable to remain quiet any longer. “I don’t poach.”

“Poach?” Beckett’s stretched-thin temper snaps. “No, sure you don’t poach. You’d rather assume that I’d cheat on someone I was dating, instead of say no to you and say I’m with someone else, just like Demming did. You’re as much of a sexist asshole as the rest of them. None of you ever ask. You just assume that I’d roll over and open my legs for you even if I was dating someone else, so you either back off or pass me off. Well, if that’s how you think you can all fuck off.”

Castle doesn’t manage to shut his open mouth before Beckett, the unflappably cool, controlled and unemotional Kate Beckett, who almost never loses her temper except as part of a game plan in Interrogation, carries right on over him on an exploded wave of fury.

“I’m not interested in anyone who thinks I’d cheat. I can speak for myself, not that any of you men believe that either. You and Demming are as bad as each other, assuming I’d cheat rather than speak up, and Ryan and Espo are acting like assholes too. The only one of you who’s got my back is O’Leary. I don’t want to see a single one of the rest of you until you’ve all pulled your heads out your asses and can treat me with some respect.” She finally draws breath. “Get out. Go home. All of you just leave me alone.”

She stalks into her bedroom and slams the door behind her, leaving Castle staring at the empty space where the remnants of her fury are still roiling. He doesn’t have a single word to say. The only one who’s got her back is O’Leary? She couldn’t have picked her words better to hurt him. He hadn’t assumed, he’d seen the messy bed. He’d had evidence.

He’d had evidence Demming was dating her, too.

Oh, shit, here they go again. He is not having this. Almost as angry with himself as with Beckett, he stands up, marches over to her bedroom door and flings it open.

“Why don’t you just tell me I’m wrong?” he yells.
“Why don’t you just ask so I know what you’re thinking?” she yells back. “I can’t read your dumb male mind. Now go away.”

“No.” Castle crosses the bedroom, as barely furnished as the main room, and drops heavily on to the bed beside her. “I won’t. You made as many assumptions as I did and somehow it’s all my fault? Hell, no. You didn’t talk to me either. How should I know O’Leary’s gay? The NYPD’s not that hot on gay rights. You were in the shower and some overmuscled mountain opened your door like he had the right to and your bed was a mess. What would you have thought the other way round, huh?”

“I’m not a toy. None of you own me and you don’t ask some other man if I’m available, you ask me. I don’t belong to them.”

“This is you being sensitive because you’re scared by tomorrow and spooked by whatever happened the first time round. You know perfectly well I thought you weren’t interested because O’Leary’s been telling you that and playing Cupid to both of us. What was I supposed to do? Force kisses on you when as far as I knew you had walked out and couldn’t care less? Hell, no. You’re complaining because I didn’t make a claim on you when you’d never given so much as a hint that you wanted one. You’d have shot me for interfering, and now you’re shooting me down for not interfering. I can’t win.”

He slumps heavily on the bed.

“I can’t win,” he says again. “You’re scared, and you never listen to anything when you’re scared. You just plough right ahead to prove you can do it and try to prove to everyone you don’t need anyone.” He stands up. “I’m going. Just like you wanted.” Pause. “I’ll still be there tomorrow.”

He gets as far as opening the bedroom door and taking a step through it before she says, “Don’t go,” in a strangulated tone which is quite clearly less than half an inch from tears. But he’s still angry.

“I’ll send O’Leary by,” he says harshly. “He’s the one you think’s got your back.”

It has precisely the wrong effect. He’d hoped to provoke her to saying you’ve got my back.

“Whatever,” she says, immediately totally locked down. “But you don’t need to. I’ll be just fine without him.”

Castle, mysteriously, hears I’ll be just fine without you too at the end of the sentence. She sits up, her face closed and arms folded.

“Go home. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Beckett… Why can’t you just say you’re sorry?”

“Sorry for what? Sorry for not saying why wouldn’t you date me when you were making it clear you weren’t interested and said so? I’m not saying sorry for your mistakes. Why do I need to say sorry? You haven’t. If you’re expecting me to apologise because that’s what women do, then you’ll be waiting a long time. You own your own mistakes. They’re not my fault. I’m not playing that game.”

Castle’s jaw drops. “What?” he stutters. “You didn’t even bother to ask me what was going on before deciding I wasn’t interested and jumped to conclusions. You’re just as bad as me. You could have asked me any time in the precinct.”
“Yeah, because asking why won’t you date me is such a likely conversation. You could have asked me, but you didn’t. Why didn’t you ask, huh? Why’s it up to me?”

“Because I was hurt ‘cause you left the loft, okay?” Castle cries, furious with himself and her both.

“Yeah, well, so was I that you didn’t want me there!” Beckett yells back.

“I thought you were finally taking a step toward me. Realising that I wanted to take care of you. But you walked out.”

“I thought you actually wanted me to move forward. Then you backed off faster than lightning.”

“I did want you to. Do.”

“You didn’t act like it.”

Castle spins round, takes two fast, furious strides back towards Beckett, and hauls her to standing in one swift, forceful move. “So I should have done this?” he bites, and crashes down on her lips, demanding entrance – and finding it.

This kiss bears as much resemblance to the earlier one as a raging grizzly does to a rabbit. It’s violent and angry on both sides.

“Should I have?” Castle gasps, lifting only briefly and invading again before she can answer. Her hands are in his hair. “Or done this?” and his hands grip at shoulder and hip so that she’s tight against him but she’s fighting back with mouth and tongue and, hands coming down, ripping open his shirt and scraping sharp nails over bone and muscle and taut flat nipples. It lights him up.

“Should I have done this?” He bites sharply on the lobe of her ear, and then licks wetly down her neck, catching her hands in one of his and holding them behind her; opening her shirt and shoving it from her shoulders, nips again between her clavicles, and then takes her mouth again, hard and rough. He lifts again.

“Should I have?”

“Yes,” she grits out, and pulls his head back down on to hers; his shirt open so hot skin meets hot skin where they’re fighting for control of the kiss; he pushes her back to the edge of her bed and down on to her back where he traps her beneath him as she’s trying to roll him because he won’t be blindsided any more. If he should have done this then he’s going to do it until she says no. He strips away her pants and panties in one swift wrench, still pillaging her mouth and pressing her down; denuding himself with one hand and flicking once across her: she’s soaked and her nails are scratching into his back and he takes her with one hard thrust, pinned under him and fuck she’s so hot and wet and tight and shattering around him as he comes.

Desperate, angry sex was not what he had intended or hoped for this evening. He rolls off her, but, in some last vestige of hope that there still might be a way through this mess, takes her with him.

She doesn’t pull away.

“I don’t think that’s what Shaw meant when she said get a good night’s sleep,” she says sardonically.

Castle is surprised into a harsh laugh. “Probably not.”

“It wasn’t exactly what I meant by we need to talk about some things, either.”
She squirms slightly, and attains a head-on-shoulder, arm across him position which, if it hadn’t been preceded by the type of angry, hot sex that usually precludes snuggling, would have been best described as a snuggle.

“Guess not.” He curls his arms more gently around her, loosening his grip slightly. “What did you mean?”

She cringes, probably at the thought of talking. After all, it’s not what they do.

Having angry, hot sex isn’t what they do either, but they’ve managed that. Maybe they can talk, too.

“About… about why you wanted me to stay in the loft, and what happened.” She tries to disengage. “But you made it clear it’s off-limits.”

Castle tugs her back, hard. “Don’t run away,” he grates. “Stay here.” His grip tightens again, but he doesn’t say anything for a moment, and she’s knotting up with every instant of silence.

“I just wanted to make it better,” he forces out, eventually. “I thought we’d get a chance…” he doesn’t finish that sentence. “But everyone got in the way and you moved out and I didn’t know why and I was pissed with you for going without even talking to me.”

There is another uncomfortable silence.

“I hoped…” Beckett starts. “And then everyone did their best right from the off to make it clear that I wasn’t one of you and I was in the way, and you didn’t stop it or talk to me. I never got a chance to talk to you. Seemed like you’d decided it was all a big mistake. So I took the hint and left. I couldn’t work out why you’d even bothered inviting me to stay.”

Another painful, almost-hostile silence stretches about them. If they weren’t holding each other, or naked on her bed, it would feel like another fight.
An angel sliding up to me

“I invited you because I wanted you there. I could have made it better if only” –

“I wanted you to make it better but that all went to hell the moment I walked in. I thought you were avoiding me.”

“I thought it was too soon. You weren’t there at all. Zoned out and then you stayed away. I thought once you’d relaxed we’d have time to talk and” –

“I was keeping out of the way. You needed to deal with all your family’s issues.”

“All of which were total lies,” Castle spits. They’ve lost so much time all because… “Alexis deliberately forced you into a position where you’d leave. She wants me to stop shadowing you and stop going to the precinct.” Beckett tries to escape his arm, and fails. “She wants me never to see you again.” He pulls her back again. “Stop running away. It didn’t help weeks ago and it won’t help now.” He stops. “I told her no,” he says, a dark knell in his voice.

Beckett makes a very odd noise. “No?” she repeats. “But…”

“No. She does not get to tell me who to see and what I can do. If I’d realised then…”

Beckett stays very quiet, and waits. Castle, prodded by anger, is talking about a subject he’d shut down hard less than an hour ago.

“I don’t care what her reasons are, or how important she is to me, she doesn’t get to do that. She doesn’t even have any good reasons. None that she’s telling me, anyway. I’m not having it.” he growls. “I’m having you, like I wanted weeks ago,” and he rolls over and rises above her and takes hard possession of her mouth. She pushes back and rolls him back to straddle him but he just keeps rolling and she’s under him again: one of his hands searching out the heat between her legs, a little rough but she likes it, oh fuck she likes it and she opens beneath him, guiding him into her and it’s not as angry, still forceful but she’s not ripping at his back, he’s not pinning her down, their kiss isn’t a battle.

She sighs beneath him, “I wanted you, too,” and succumbs to his possession, softening slightly and, at last, welcoming him to her. He gentles too, not slowing his hard strokes but seducing her mouth to compliance; slipping one firm hand over her breast and palming it to match the rhythm of their movement; stealing the moan from her throat and giving back his own noises of desire. Her fingers slip from his back downward, pulling him on to her, and then one slim hand slips between them and touches him touching her so that her whole body tenses around him and he thrusts faster, harder as she arches to meet him and she touches again and takes them both over together.

This time it’s definitely a snuggle, and it’s mutual. A little time goes by, in which nothing much happens, but the hostile, unwelcoming atmosphere of earlier is completely dissipated.

“Did we just talk about something important, Beckett?” Castle asks, sleepily.

“Huh… um, yes? Ow!”

“Okay, you’re real.”

“What did you do that for?” she asks crossly. “That hurt.” Castle grabs both her hands just ahead of her retaliation.
“To prove it’s not a dream.”

“Uh?” Beckett says, being the limit of intelligent comment presently available to her.

“Us, *talking*?” he says disbelievingly. “I mean, that’s even more unlikely than being naked in bed with you.”

“So you pinched me,” Beckett replies, not impressed.

“Yep.” Castle develops a slow, lazy, predatory smile. “I could do it again,” he drawls, and slips a hand to her breast, finger and thumb circling the nipple in a way that indicates precisely what he means.

“Still not a good night’s sleep.”

Castle peers at his watch, still on his wrist. “‘S only just after ten. You’ll get your beauty sleep.” He wriggles into spooning around her. “‘Specially as I’m staying.”

“Says who?” she snips.

“Me.”

“Oh? And why do you get to decide?”

“Because you want me to,” Castle says with a healthy dose of arrogance. “Stop you worrying about tomorrow.” He wraps her in more closely. “I’m good for curing worries.” He hesitates. “We do all have your back. Not just O’Leary.”

“It hasn’t felt much like it,” she drags. “You… well, we’ve talked about that, and it wasn’t your fault. But Ryan and Espo were downright dumb.”

“Yeah. Um…full disclosure: I heard you taking them apart yesterday.”

“Yeah. Well. It wasn’t anything to do with them.”

Beckett does her best to stuff herself under a pillow to hide her acute embarrassment, and fails.

“I knew you _like_-liked me,” Castle says smugly.

“What, being in bed with you isn’t enough of a clue?”

“That’s only in the last couple of hours. But we could take advantage of it for another couple of hours if you want.”

“It’s still not a good night’s sleep.”

“Just a good night.”

Beckett snickers dirtily. “Modest much?”

“You weren’t complaining about how good I made you feel a minute ago.”

“ Wouldn’t want to damage your delicate ego,” she sniggers.

Castle’s broad hand slides around her hip and lands somewhat below her navel, while his thick thigh tangles between her legs and opens a gap into which his fingers stray. A sharp pang of
pleasure scythes through her, and she gasps. She’s trapped, unable to tease back. He’s hard again, pressing against her rear.

“Let’s see now,” he rasps into her ear, and nips the lobe. His other hand stretches from its previous home under her neck downwards to cup her breast and toy idly with the hard pink nipple. “That sounded like you weren’t quite convinced, Detective. I think I’d better try harder to convince you.” His lower hand moves slowly and firmly. She writhes against him as he flicks over the small knot of nerves, trying to find space to move and not receiving it. “Nuh-uh. Just stay there. After all, I need to make sure you have a really good night.” His busy, wicked fingers slip and slide between her legs, barely entering, rubbing her already sensitised core and sending fire down her nerves. His mouth nibbles naughtily at her neck, finding another point to make her gasp and move against him.

Slowly, inexorably, with total control, Castle works Beckett up and up: alternately playing with her breasts: little pinches, soft palming to soothe them, rolling; and slipping firm fingertips through hot wet folds: all the time murmuring in her ear, velvet vice poured out in a smooth, seductive stream of wicked words to match his wicked actions. “I think you like that,” he whispers as she whimpers. “Here, locked in my arms, when I can do anything I like and you can’t do anything about it.” He circles her core, and dips fingers briefly inward. “You’re so ready.” And the fingers withdraw.

“Don’t…”

“Don’t what? Don’t do this?” His broad digits slide in again, and she emits a heated moan and squirms frantically in his grip, trying to bring him deeper. “Maybe I should do this instead?” He nips at her ear, licks over her neck, fondles her breasts delicately.

“More,” she demands. “Touch me.”

“Touch you? Touch you where? I am touching you.” He smiles slowly against her skin. One hand feathers widely over her ribs; the other cups her, both barely in contact. She tries to move to bring his hot hard weight where she wants it, but she can’t do that either. In lustful desperation she tugs at his hand to push it against her, to give her the friction she needs.

“Noope. You don’t get that till you ask nicely.” His hands move even more delicately, fluttering unsatisfyingly. She moans. His leg twines around one of hers and opens her a little further.

“If you don’t get me off now I will shoot you.”

“Oh, no. I’m having far too much fun to let you shoot me. I’m going to show you a really good time, Detective Beckett. And you’re going to enjoy every minute of it.” He smiles angelically. “So am I.” A nicely judged sweep of fingertips turns her growl to a gasp. “I’m sure you’ll want to take your revenge. Just remember my safe word is apples.” He moves again, and the gasp is more pronounced. “What’s yours?” he asks innocently. She says something entirely and filthily profane. “No, that won’t do. It’s got to be something you wouldn’t say in the – er – heat of the moment.” He ponders for a moment. “That rules out lots of words.” He thinks some more. “How about cloves? Goes with apples.”

“Stop teasing and do something useful.”

“But I’m enjoying myself,” he says piously. “You wouldn’t want me to be miserable, would you?” He continues to play, until Beckett can’t find words in the swell of sensation and is completely unable to think. Finally, Castle pushes slowly into her from behind and, completely in control, takes her over the edge.

“There,” he murmurs. “Now you’ll have a good night’s sleep. I’ve got you.”
“Clean up,” she mutters, and wriggles out of bed to the bathroom. Shortly, the shower sounds. Much as he wanted to follow, Castle thinks that Beckett now needs to sleep, and joining her under the shower is not likely to induce sleep in any short time. He’ll tidy himself after she’s safely tucked up, and then he’s going to hold her close all night and make sure that the really good night is followed by a really good sleep.

She sways back, suddenly exhausted, and slides under the light coverlet.

“I’m going to wash too,” he murmurs, “and then I’ll be back.”

“Got my back,” she slurs, half asleep already.

By the time he returns she’s out of it. He simply watches, for a while, then switches off the light: dark hair against pale pillows and a pale, drawn face; body curled into itself, foetally self-protective. It’s not comforting. None of this is comforting.

He wonders if he’d hit on more than he understood, earlier. He’s sure she’s scared, and she’d said pretend I’m enjoying it, whatever it is, and then she’d obliquely indicated that there’d been some unwanted actions – oh, she’d said it’s not you who’ll be felt up, oh, ugh. That wasn’t oblique, that was overt. And he’d said – understatement of the year – you’re sensitive about tomorrow and whatever happened. Sensitive. Not exactly an empathetic word choice there, Rick. And, he realises, kick-ass, bad-ass Beckett never, ever lies down under poor treatment – just look at how she’d laid into Esposito, her closest team member, when he’d tried to get involved, and Ryan, and him – and now she’s going to have to.

They couldn’t have picked a worse undercover scenario if they’d tried. Bad memories, bad experiences, and everything she most loathes, all in a situation where she can’t defend herself.

And, of course, there’s an unknown factor out there too. He can’t come up with anything reassuring about that. He has no better theories than she does, and that scares him too; here in the dark, in her Spartan, unwelcoming apartment. He shivers, and cuddles against her: taking as much comfort as he is giving.

He, too, has his own troubles, and staying out all night at Beckett’s is not going to improve any of them; but he doesn’t give in to emotional blackmail and, while Alexis is the most important person in his life, she still doesn’t have the right to control him. This currently seems to be the teenage equivalent of a toddler tantrum: give me my own way or I’ll make your life hell. He thinks over what Alexis had said, very carefully, trying not to jump to conclusions or to annoyance. She’d said, variously: totally intimidating, rubbing it in, everything that Mom isn’t, she’s so perfect when I don’t even have a mother who cares.

He simply does not get it. Sure, Meredith isn’t the poster girl for anything much except excessive shopping, but Alexis is pretty much perfect. Up till now, anyway. Perfect grades, perfect behaviour, perfectly mature, lots of friends, hobbies, even pretty talented on the violin. So why should Alexis feel threatened by Beckett? There really is no good reason. Sure, Beckett is amazing, but… no more amazing than his daughter.

Except that Beckett is totally confident. Totally. And Alexis, like most teen girls, only appears confident. He’s been the recipient of enough tearful breakdowns about lost marks, imagined slights and worries about upcoming tests, music recitals, and so forth to know that. So maybe she’s upset because Beckett’s entirely bad-ass.

Except that Beckett isn’t. Beckett is scared senseless of tomorrow, she’s simply hiding it very, very well. (He’s pretty scared about tomorrow, too, and he’s hiding it too. Reasonably well.) So it
stands to reason (if only emotions were ever reasonable) that she might not always be quite as confident as she appears. On the other hand, this situation has dragged up old memories, and he’s never seen her uncertain about her abilities or the job before. He’s never really seen her in a situation where it didn’t involve cop work, though, and she’s pretty damn good at that. He’s never seen her emotions properly ruffled: even that one dark night in the bullpen when she first admitted to her mother’s murder and her father’s alcoholism her pain was briefly visible and then glossed over. Hard shell, and that’s all Alexis has ever seen: Beckett at work, and occasional visits to the loft, almost entirely related to work.

This is not simple. Alexis has totally the wrong impression, but it’s not just that, because it’s not Beckett who’s rubbed it in. There’s an appallingly heavy dose of Alexis’s insecurity in there, but it’s not clear if that’s just normal teen issues (which he might be able to untangle relatively easily with some blunt talking and some sensible boundaries) or whether there is an issue which he hasn’t yet uncovered, probably to do with Meredith’s inability to be a mother, or indeed even a reasonable facsimile of a caring human being.

He’d thought he could make up for the lack of a mother by being mother and father both. He’d thought he had made up for it. Alexis is behaving as if he is both – she’d certainly been emphatic enough that she disapproved of any idea that he might marry Beckett – but she’s also doing it in a way that implies that he doesn’t have a right to introduce anyone else, which is not tolerable.

All of which simply brings him back round to the original problem. Alexis deliberately drove out Beckett, for reasons which are still not totally clear but which will need explored on the basis of his present thinking; and, now that he’s got her, he is not going to give up either Beckett-as-lover or Beckett-as-inspiration.

He gives up. He’s tired, and Beckett is sound asleep next to him, which is something for which he’s wished for some time. He shifts a fraction to be more comfortable and to tuck her in more effectively, pulls the thin cover over himself and seeks sleep. Eventually, he finds it.

Not long enough later, he’s woken by Beckett giving a good impression of a prize-fighter. Fortunately she’s spooned in, which might be all that’s preventing him being knocked out. As quickly as she’d begun, and interestingly coincident with him brushing a kiss over her nape and a soft, deep, wordless murmur into her ear, she stops, and curls back into him. She hasn’t woken, and he follows her back into sleep.

Beckett’s alarm goes off with its normal gentle tune, and as she slowly emerges she discovers that she is held in an outflung arm. Ah. The gentle whiffling on her neck is not a previously undiscovered flaw in the air conditioning, but Castle, quietly asleep and yet still very much attached to her. She wriggles carefully, but rather than being able to detach without necessarily waking him, she’s pulled back in.

“No,” he mutters. Thinking, or indeed wakefulness, is not obviously figuring in his words or actions. “Got you. No running.”

“I have to get up. Work.” She shudders, remembering what today will bring.

“Stay in bed.”

“I can’t.” She detaches herself. Castle drags a single eye half-open.

“Uh?”

“Work. Pays the bills.”
Life enters Castle’s face. Both eyes open, and achieve focus. “Oh,” he says. “I guess.” He abruptly jerks to sitting and full attention. “Oh, shit. I’m here and I need to get home and wash and change and be there for eight-thirty.” He flings himself out of bed. “Where’s my shirt? Where are my pants?”

Beckett looks around as she swings her legs out of bed, and blushes. “Um… your pants are there,” she says, gesturing to the doorway, “and your shirt is…er… over there” – she flicks her hand to the other side of the room, and stands up to make her way to the bathroom – “and your boxers – I don’t know.” She doesn’t mention that her bra is against another wall and her panties practically in the bathroom. She needs to find clean underwear anyway, so it’s not relevant.

The bathroom door closes behind her. She has a fast shower, shaves underarms, legs and, remembering the requirements without any pleasure at all, more than just her bikini line; dries her hair into some sort of model-smooth fashion (she hasn’t forgotten how), applies a bare minimum of makeup because it’ll all be cleaned off and reapplied for the shoot anyway, and walks back out in only a towel to find some basic, plain underwear. There’s no point in anything pretty, and she really, really doesn’t want to give anyone any ideas. They’ll have enough ideas without her helping it along.

She finishes dressing in a dank fog of mutinous misery. While she does that, she’s vaguely aware of Castle rapidly pulling himself together in the background. She finishes buttoning her jeans, and straightens up. She’s in a plain blue t-shirt, no logos, no slogans, dark blue jeans, Converse sneakers, and she throws a denim jacket over it. Perfect to be dressed for the set – easy removal. No need to look great for casting this time. When she checks herself over in the mirror she resembles a thousand late-twenties/early thirties women living on a budget.

Of course, that might be because she is living on a budget. Her wardrobe was largely gained at some good discount shops over a wide area, coupled with some cheap bulk buys of t-shirts for when she’s off duty. She did indulge herself with two sets of really nice underwear, but most of even the prettier scraps came from low-rent brands. She needs to replace so many things.

Next thing she knows, Castle’s arms are around her and he’s pulled her back into him. Morning stubble grazes her neck.

“I’ll be there,” he promises. “In the van with Shaw, but I’ll be there.” He turns her round and takes her mouth, branding his claim and his promise.

“Let’s just do this,” she says. “Get it over with. Just be us.”

She steps back and stands straight.

“Time to get this bastard.”
Shaw looks Beckett up and down when she walks in.

“Dressing for success?” she says, a little too sardonically for Beckett’s strained patience.

“Have you ever modelled?” Beckett bites back immediately and aciduliously. “Trust me to know what I need to look like for easy make up and dressing, or call it off.”

Shaw takes a metaphorical step backwards. “Okay,” she says placatingly, “you’re the one who’s done it. Avery, let’s get that wire in. Detective Beckett, how does this work? Where do you change?”

“Depends. Usually there was a dressing room, separate from the set.”

“How far away?” Avery asks.

“Depended where we were.”

Avery taps, and produces a floorplan of Stardance. “Show me where the dressing rooms are, and the sets?”

Beckett examines it. “Okay. Set was here – we were taken into it, so I’m sure of that.” She looks more closely still. “I think these must be the changing rooms.”

“Mmm,” Avery hums, and taps some more. “Right. So a maximum of maybe two hundred feet range should do it – oh. Will the changing rooms be on the same floor as the set?”

“Probably. Can’t guarantee it.”

“Ah. Any way you can take your purse or anything into the set with you?”

“No.”

Both agents acquire a look of some unhappiness. “Wire in your clothes isn’t going to work as well as we’d like.”

“Why does it matter? At the shoot, nothing’s going to happen. There’ll be people in and out all the time, and I won’t have more than my own bottle of water. We’ve eliminated everyone else, and by the time I give him some encouragement I’ll be back in my own clothes and you can pick it up then.”

“I’d prefer there was no chance he claimed you’d entrapped him earlier,” Shaw says.

“Why don’t you get Selwyn or someone to attach a bug to the camera?” Castle says, appearing from the doorway. “Or Avery could do it?”

Shaw blinks assessingly. Agent Avery looks hopefully enthusiastic.

“I’ve got one right here,” he says happily. “Tiny black camera/voice receiver, range about half a mile. He’d never notice.”

“Okay, let’s do it. Good thought, Mr Castle.” Shaw turns back to Beckett. “But we still need the wire in your clothes. Bra will do. T-shirt off, please.”
Beckett blanches.

“Come on,” Shaw says impatiently. “We’ve all seen it before.”

Castle pulls down the blinds, and then shuts the door with himself tactfully on the other side. Beckett strips off her t-shirt without further ado.

“I’m not giving the whole bullpen a show,” Beckett says coldly. “Next time, you might think about that before making dumb statements.”

Shaw stops in her tracks, and colours. She mutters an apology, and looks a touch shamefaced. “Avery, fit the wire, please.”

Beckett stands still as Avery’s dry, uncaring fingers place the wire without so much as a hint of anything other than bored competence. It’s very reassuring, not least because if there had been any other implication she’s sufficiently tense to have taken his head off. Possibly literally.

“Okay, all done.”

Beckett shrugs back into her t-shirt.

“Good to go.”

“I’ll get myself over to Stardance. No cruiser.”

Shaw opens the door. “Everyone, in here. We’ll just run a test of the receivers. It worked last night, but we’re not taking chances here.”

“Worked last night?” Beckett emits, open-mouthed. “You checked up without telling me you were going to test them?”

“Yes. Standard practice,” Shaw says easily. “If we warned you, you might have made sure you stayed within range. Now we know it’s good, but I want another test now.” She hands out receivers to Ryan and Espo, and to O’Leary. “Switch them on.” The devices register. “Okay, Detective Beckett, you go now. If we lose the signal I’ll call you. Please check in before you go into Stardance.”

Beckett recognises that as an order, despite the please. “Okay,” she says, still a little edgily. “Let’s get this done.”

And on that exit line, she leaves.

Castle had dashed home, rushing to wash, shave and change and to be back at the precinct as near to eight as he can. He manages the personal grooming side of that, but as soon as he exits his bedroom and then study, he’s greeted by Alexis, scowling.

“Where were you last night?”

“Was Grams not here? She said she was going to be.”

“Yes,” Alexis says sulkily.

“Then why are you asking? Were you worried about me? You only had to ask Grams to call me if you were.”
“If you gave me back my phone I wouldn’t have to ask.”

Castle sighs. “If you explain what’s wrong, then we might get somewhere. Why are you so angry with Detective Beckett?”

“You were with her, weren’t you?” Alexis accuses. “You couldn’t leave her alone even though you’re making me unhappy.”

“I was with Beckett. You’re still the most important person in my life, but you don’t get to stop me seeing anyone I want to.”

“You just don’t care about me,” Alexis cries. “If I was really important you’d stop.”

“If I was really important to you,” Castle retorts, his patience finally snapping, “then you wouldn’t be trying this sort of controlling behaviour or emotional blackmail. Nothing I do with Beckett changes how I feel about you. You’ll always be my daughter. But right now you’re behaving completely unacceptably.”

He flicks a glance at his watch.

“You need to get to school. But I want you to think really, really hard about how you’d feel if I told you, say, you weren’t to see Paige any more because I don’t think she’s the right friend for you. Or what you’d say to a friend who told you her boyfriend was stopping her seeing her other friends because he doesn’t like them.” He looks very straight at Alexis. “Really think about it.”

She disappears at speed. Castle controls an urge to scream in frustration, or punch walls, neither of which will be helpful at this point. He needs to get to the precinct.

When he walks in Beckett is in with the FBI agents, not exactly appearing relaxed and happy. He wanders over, and pitches in.

Finally, Beckett leaves. There is a decided stalk to her gait.

“Detectives Esposito and Ryan, take your receiver and be ready to follow Detective Beckett. The shoot won’t be done before four, at earliest, but keep an eye on it. Detective O’Leary, same for you. Mr Castle, you can join us in the van where we’ll be listening and watching.”

Shaw claps her hands. “Let’s move, men.”

Beckett attains the vicinity of Stardance with a good twenty minutes to spare, and uses it to check in with Shaw, tersely, and to purchase a double espresso, which she downs in short order. She chews on a breath mint, as she’d swiftly learned to do at seventeen, and walks into Stardance a careful ten minutes early.

It’s a different receptionist, fortunately.

“Kate Beckett,” she says meekly. “Here for the Coronal shoot.”

The receptionist checks her system, and finally nods. “Okay, you can go through to room six.” She does as she’s told.

Behind Beckett’s back, she is faintly aware of Avery’s tones, asking to see Selwyn. She relaxes fractionally, knowing that the team is on the stakeout, and walks through to room six with the catwalk sway that she hasn’t yet forgotten: one foot directly in front of the other, a slight lean back,
her posture struttingly confident, but her expression a little uncertain: a woman who knows her next month’s meals depend on pleasing the photographer and thus the client.

Room six is already full of hair and make-up people, brisk and cool.

“Sit down.”

Her t-shirt is removed, hair brushed, face cleansed to naked skin.

“Okay,” someone says over her head. “It’s Coronal.”

“Yeah? Okay. So, sex hair, just fell-out-of-bed look?”

“Yeah, that’s it. A bit rough-sex, too. Wild night.”

“Isn’t she a bit past it?”

Beckett manages not to move.

“They’re trying a new line. Slightly older women, more sophisticated. Aiming at the well-off market.”

“It’ll never catch on. If you’re over twenty-five, you’re past it. Nothing but kids and drudgery.”

Beckett looks at the twenty-not-a-lot sharp-faced blonde in the mirror and thinks about last night. What an idiot.

“I don’t know,” the make-up artist says. “It’s all about sales, anyway. If Coronal think there’s a market, they’re probably right.”

“Ugh.” The blonde looks as if anyone over twenty-five should be euthanised.

“Anyway, let’s get this one into shape.”

Beckett obediently sits quiet and still as she is scrubbed, her hair gelled and artfully mussed, her lips made into a swollen pout, her eyes smudged and a slight flush added to her skin. The make-up is so heavy she wouldn’t necessarily have recognised herself either. She watches in the mirror and hates every dehumanised moment of preparation: turning her into a walking sex doll. There won’t be any talking. Models are not encouraged to talk on shoots like this one. Emote, sure. In a strictly limited range, consisting of lust.

She supposes, very bitterly, that she could always use last night’s first round to attain a suitable mental state – but she’d so much rather not taint their newfound closeness by using it to manage this degrading photoshoot.

Unfortunately, she has to. They need to get this guy – or guys. She shivers. All her memories are nipping at her mind. She shoves them back and out the way. It’s not modelling, it’s a Vice op.

That’s not much better.

She has her team behind her. If it really starts to go bad, O’Leary will swoop in like the wrath of Bigfoot. The boys will be around, and Espo can direct all that misplaced rage to a better target. And Castle will be there, then and afterwards.

It’s better. Not great, not good, not even mediocre – but not quite hellish.
“You’re done. Outfits” – you mean those scraps of sex-selling? – “are in order. Numbered. Don’t get them out of order.”

The tone is the same patronising models-are-brainless that she remembers. She just about manages to nod meekly and not make a blistering reply.

“No,” she says, complacently, and turns to the first set. Neither the hairdresser nor the make-up artist leaves. Beckett curdles internally, reminds herself forcefully that this is normal, and changes under their assessing eyes.

The dresser swishes in: a slim man, early thirties, Beckett judges.

“Stand up,” he orders, in a thin, whiny voice: already judging her and finding her wanting. He runs his gaze over her. “That’s not right. Come here.” She does.

“More tits on show.” He moves the fabric of the already revealing bra so that she’s almost spilling out. “Better.” She doesn’t comment on the scrape of his fingers across her nipples, or the flare of unpleasantly dispassionate lust in his eyes. She wants to hurt him, and hides it. He steps back and looks at her. “That’ll do. For now. Follow me.” He turns without checking she’s following, and opens the door. The make-up artist tosses her a robe, which she rapidly dons, and thinks that Selwyn doesn’t know how this dresser behaves. She’ll change that, as soon as this is done. She pads after the dresser, on to the set.

Her guts twist, instantly; adrenaline kicks up.

It’s a bedroom set. The bed is untidy, a full-length standing mirror is placed close to a vanity; a nightstand beside it. That wouldn’t be unbearable. Not quite.

It’s the props.

The props make it perfectly clear that this is one step from BDSM Monthly. Coronal is clearly trying to attract a very different, very sophisticated market. Sophisticated in the more unusual sense of sexually adventurous and experienced. Beckett looks at the set again, and makes a considerable effort not to react.

There is a blindfold on the dented pillow; a set of leather cuffs on the nightstand. The drawer is half-open, hinting that there might be more toys within. Another set of cuffs is insinuatingly draped over the end of the bed. The mirror is quite carefully angled.

Beckett feels sick. Okay, she’s not naïve. But this is something she’d prefer to explore in a committed relationship as a change, not a common practice or implying that this is the way all women like it to be, all the time. This is going to be D/S pornography, or near as dammit.

She can act. She’s going to have to. Because right now all she wants to do is turn her missing Glock on everyone associated with this absolute disaster up to and including both FBI agents, and then start giving all of them more holes than a colander. She smooths her face before anyone can notice, and walks on set.

___

Castle is, despite his worry over Beckett’s likely state, fascinated by the FBI van. He peppers Avery with questions and is desperate to play with all the cool switches and interesting levers. Even when Avery goes to place the bug, he bothers Agent Shaw with more questions until she snaps.

“Mr Castle! This isn’t a game or a playground or even a research session. Don’t touch anything or I
will remove your fingers.”

Shaw, Castle notes, does not indicate that she will simply take his hand away from temptation. He has the clear impression that she equally means that she will detach his fingers from his hand. He sits on his unmaimed hands and tries to look adorable. It doesn’t work.

Shortly, Agent Avery returns. “All done,” he confirms, and fiddles with the electronics until the screens and speakers register. “Good to go.”

“What’s happening?” Castle asks, suddenly focused.

“This one is for recording the wire in Detective Beckett’s clothes,” Avery advises, holding up a set of headphones attached to one device. “This one” – he gestures at a larger screen with more headphones – “is the bug on the camera.”

Castle looks at the screen where the set is being constructed. For a while, he’s relatively interested. About the point they wheel the bed in, he begins to tense. When they position the mirror, his fists are locked hard. But when they put the props out, he begins to swear under his breath. This is utterly appalling. It’s worse, because he knows that in other, mutual, circumstances he might have found it arousing, either way around. Not now, not here. Please God, not now, not here.

And then Beckett walks in, swathed in a cheap, short, cotton robe. Castle watches her look around at the set and doesn’t miss her microsecond pause and hitch. She… doesn’t look like herself. Mussed hair; smudged, sexy eyes; painted, pouting lips. She’s a centrefold dream: everyman’s just fell out of my bed where she did everything I wanted desire. When the robe drops, in response to a sharp command from the photographer, he’s shamingly, instantly hard. It’s sheer sin: lush breasts almost falling out of her bra, tiny panties covering everything but giving the impression of display.

If only it weren’t so bitterly clear that she hates it. He’s ashamed of himself, of his physical response to the sight, and furious with the necessity of the operation. He understands, as an economic matter, why Coronal are using this route: sex sells, and (biased though Castle may be) Beckett is certainly appallingly sexy. Men everywhere would see this and buy the lingerie for their wives or girlfriends.

Men everywhere are never going to see this, because Castle is going to ensure that every last copy is destroyed. No-one is going to look at Beckett as an object.

And yet, shamefully, he can’t take his eyes from the screen, and he hates himself for it.

“Get the robe off,” Connor orders. Beckett drops it, and stands still under his objectifying stare. She remembers that dehumanising look. Without more than a brief glance, she knows that he’s getting off on the power to tell her to do whatever he wants for the photos.

“On the bed.”

She can’t bridle, or hesitate, or do anything other than comply. She’s completely powerless, and worse, she’ll have to try to lead him on for later.

The orders go on. She does as she’s told. She exudes sensual enjoyment, and all the while she’s screaming imprecations in the back of her head, because this is not how it should be. This is not how it was, with Castle.

She makes suggestive gestures on command, and thinks about blood and pain. She changes into ever more erotic garb, and fights back the crowding memories every time the photographer
positions her, every time the dresser touches her. Both of them are going too far, and she can’t do anything about it.

Yet. Later, she will do plenty. Oh yes. She, unlike real models, has options, and in the end, she has the power to make these perverts pay.

Now, look a little frightened, but turned on. C’mon, girlie, you know how it feels. Imagine you’re pinned down, it’s all getting rough. That’s it. Pout like you wanna be kissed hard. Open slightly. Mouth and your legs. Lick your lips. I want them wet.

Another set of lingerie. Another scene from which he can’t look away.

You want it. Show me how much you want it. Offer up the cuffs, as if someone’s there. He’s in charge, and you want it. Make me believe it. That’s right. Bite that lip.

Another scene. He can’t bear it. It’s indescribable. Voyeuristically vile.


Click. Click. Click.

Avery stopped watching after a single, flaring-cheeked minute, scorching his dark complexion. Shaw, stone-faced, hasn’t missed an instant.

“She hates it,” Castle bites out.

“Yes. But she’s doing what we need her to. Look at Connor. He’s caught. As long as she doesn’t lose it and deck him” – there’s a tone in Shaw’s voice that makes Castle think she wouldn’t mind that at all, once they’ve got the collar – “this is working out just perfectly.”

“But” –

“Mr Castle, you are in here to stop you doing anything stupid. I know you want to go in there and stop all this, but Detective Beckett was perfectly plain. She agreed to this and it is not your place to prevent her. She makes her own professional decisions. You do not have any right to stop that.”

“But” –

“Detective Beckett is a grown woman and a senior police detective. She doesn’t need your protection.” Shaw looks at him. “If you want to make sure she never works with you again, interfere. She won’t thank you for treating her like a fragile fool. This doesn’t degrade her.”

Shaw’s sharp, acid words register. He doesn’t have the right to stop her. He’d seen her take Espo apart for treating her like a poor, pathetic little girl.

But he wants to stop it. Protect her. Hide her away from the leering, predatory eyes and the over-familiar touches. Anything to stop it.

He absolutely can’t stop it.
The Devil walking next to me

Finally, it’s over. That is, the shoot is over. The next phase, however, is not. Connor is crawling around her, oozing flattery over her, obviously and unpleasantly aroused. She feels dirty, smirched. But the job – the collar – comes first.

“Good job, Kate,” he says. “You’ve got a real talent.”

“Thank you,” she says demurely, and manufactures an appealing smile: a little shy, a little hopeful. “I’m really glad you thought I did well. You made it easy.” She wants to spit in his face.

“It’s telling the right story to get you into it,” he murmurs. “It felt like you were really getting into it.”

“You give good story,” Beckett purrs, flirtation lacing her tone. “I loved hearing it. It was really real.”

Connor smiles at her, with a hard edge underlying it. “Wanna come for a drink? It’s unusual for a model to still be hired for lingerie shoots at over twenty-five, but I can see why you are. You really gave out the right atmosphere. Those shots are going to win awards.”

Over my dead body, Beckett thinks. “Lemme get my jacket,” she says.

“Oh, did anyone tell you, you get to keep the costumes,” Connor says smoothly. “Coronal always let the models keep them.”

In very different circumstances, Beckett would have appreciated that enormously. Ten very sexy lingerie sets, for free? But not this time. She might take them, all the same – and ceremonially burn them. Maybe that’ll take away the taint. She wouldn’t be able to look at them. She keeps all of those thoughts firmly hidden.

“Wow!” she says enthusiastically. “That’s a great perk.” She regards Connor worshipfully. “Do you do all Coronal’s shoots?”

“Yeah.”

“Wow,” she repeats, and allows a tiny hint of calculation to enter her expression. “I’d love to come for a drink with you.”

Connor smiles more widely. “Go get your jacket, then, and don’t forget the perks. I’ll be waiting outside.”

“I could text her. Call her. Just so she knows we’re here.”

“She knows. You are not to contact her. We have the wire. She knows we can hear and track her. It’s all going just fine, Mr Castle. Don’t screw it up.”

“Where are we going to?”

“This little bar I know, up near West Eightieth. You’ll like it.”

“Does it do spritzers? I love white wine spritzers.”
“Sure. It has some really unusual wines. Not your ordinary Californian.”

By the end of the car journey, Beckett is thoroughly on edge from acting the slightly desperate, ageing model who needs to catch a break and thinks that the photographer can provide it. Connor’s innuendos are not helping, nor is the need to respond in kind and keep him interested. He’s far too interested as it is, and his unpleasantly intent smile has a decided flavour of I-know-something-you-don’t-know. He still hasn’t named the bar, either, which is not much help.

They pull up outside a rather pleasant, small wine bar. Beckett, desperately holding to her assumed personality, remembers to stick with the catwalk strut. She looks up at the sign.


“They’ve got some really special wines.” He ushers her in.

“Detective O’Leary, where are you?”

“Just pulling in next to the suspect’s car.”

“Okay, they’re in Berries. Sit tight. Don’t go in unless I give the go.”


“I will handcuff you to the van, if I have to,” Shaw notes idly.

“Castle, it’s good,” O’Leary reassures. “I’m right outside.”

“Enough chit-chat. O’Leary, hold there. I’ll check in with Detectives Ryan and Esposito.”

She taps at another line. “Detectives?”

“Shaw?” Ryan says. “We’re tracking.”

“Okay. They’re in a bar. Detective O’Leary is outside. Be ready, but I’d estimate you have twenty minutes minimum. Park up, somewhere out of sight.”

“So how long have you been a photographer?” Beckett asks.

They’re sitting at a wooden table, discreetly within a half-booth. The bar is artfully lit to suggest intimacy: other tables are occupied by couples, only interested in each other.

“Fifteen years. Started at school, took prom photos, got into the game in Seattle, and then I got the Coronal deal. They love my style. I’ve been their main man for years. San Francisco, Paris, London – I fly all over.” He watches her carefully as she sips her spritzer. “If they like you, they keep you. If they like those photos maybe they’ll keep you on.”

“That would be great. I’ve never been out of the States. I’d love to travel.” But not with you, you sleazy sonofabitch.

“I could put in a good word…”

“I’d really appreciate it.” She shifts her hand a tiny bit nearer Connor’s, without a flinch. His smile increases. She sips her spritzer. He hasn’t been near it. She’ll need to push the issue.
Beckett acquires an embarrassed half-smile. “Um… ‘scuse me,” she murmurs. “I need to take a moment.”

She leaves her jacket but takes her purse, just like any woman would who’s looking forward to the rest of the evening, sending the right signals. But this is getting to the sharp end and she’s more and more nervous. If this plays out as they expect, this is Connor’s chance to dope her wine, and after that, she’ll be in no state to do anything. She’s totally dependent on the team and the tech.

Her phone beeps as she’s in the restroom. She reads the text, and breathes out slowly.

“Avery, text Detective Beckett. Warn her O’Leary’s coming in.”

Shaw flips on her phone.

“Detective O’Leary?”

“Yes?”

“Detective Beckett’s pushing the pace. She’s given him an open chance to spike her drink, and I don’t think he’ll turn that down. Change of plan. I want you in there so that you can get that glass before the server cleans it up.”

“Sure thing. I got some evidence bags in the car. Want me to go in now?”

“Yeah. She should know you’re coming. Try to stay close to her table, if you can.”

“Okay.”

Beckett returns to the table with a beautiful smile for Connor. “Sorry about that,” she says.

“No problem. What do you think of the wine?”

She takes a drink, and doesn’t notice anything different in the taste. “Lovely. I’ve never tasted anything like it. What is it?”

“It’s from France.”

“Wow.” She sips again. Connor’s attention is distracted.

“What the hell is that?” he says, looking past her. It’s the first time he’s sounded sincere since she’d walked into Stardance this morning.

“What?” She turns around, knowing what that is and very glad that the team had let her know. “Jeeze. That’s… jeeze.”

“It’s a freak,” Connor emits.

“Sure is,” she agrees. “I don’t like muscle men. Too big, and vain with it. They’re no fun.” Connor looks flattered. Beckett takes another mouthful of her spritzer. Connor has a slug of his red.

Ah. There it is, beginning. He did spike her drink. She knows her tolerance, and it’s a lot more than four mouthfuls of spritzer. But if you’re a model, and you don’t eat much, or properly, your alcohol tolerance might well be an awful lot lower.
You might well not recognise that this isn’t normal.

She plays up to Connor, and lets the feeling of intoxication continue. She’s aware that her speech is less precise, her laugh less controlled, her gestures a little random. She’s beginning to miss words, not be able to pick up all of what he’s saying. The wire will catch it all, though: she needn’t worry. She keeps sipping.

“You okay?” Connor asks, sounding – feigning – concerned, but with an undercurrent of contempt. “I think you’ve had enough.” He helps her stand up, pretending to be the perfect gentleman, drapes her jacket over her shoulders, ensures she has her purse. “I’d better take you home. Where’d you live?”

Beckett, by now too befuddled to lie, gives him her address. He puts an arm around her waist, and supports her out of the bar and into his sedan.

“Agent Shaw, I got it. Little bit of hassle from the staff, but I pulled the badge and we’re good. Want me to start following?”

“Yes. I’ll get a tech to you if I can, otherwise, don’t lose that glass and wine.”

“I’ve been a detective a few years now. I know how to treat evidence.”

“True. But if we need to get help for Detective Beckett, I want to be sure we know what he gave her.”

“Where’re we goin’,” Beckett asks, slurring.

“I’m taking you home,” Connor says.

“Doesn’t look like the way home,” she argues. “Wrong way.”

“Shortcut. You’re not well.”

She flops back in the seat. She’d agreed to this. Get the guy. Get this guy. She hangs on to that one thought.

“Wake up. We’re here.” Connor is shaking her roughly. “Get out the car. Now.”

“Wha’?” She tries to focus. Her knees aren’t working so well. “This isn’t home.”

“No. Move!” He hustles her along.

“Where’re we?” She tries to pick up a street sign, and fails. It’s gloomy, and it’s hard to see.

“Why’re we by the river? My apartment’s not at the river…”

“Move!”

She stumbles. It’s accidental, but somewhere in her drugged brain she thinks that it might slow things up. She needs to buy time, but she’s not sure why any more. She falls, less deliberately than she would have liked, scraping hand and knees on the rough surface.

“Tracking, Agent Shaw.”
“How far away are you? Where are they?”

“Looks like he’s aiming for the warehouses near the cruise terminal. West 58th. We’re right around the corner.”

“Detective O’Leary, where are you?”

“Still above West 60th. Moving as fast as I can.”

“Detectives Ryan and Esposito” –

“He’s stopped,” Avery says.

“Get there. Don’t leave your vehicle.”

Castle is listening to Beckett’s body wire. He’s not happy. He knows she’d said she was doing this, but… listening to her being abducted is doing nothing for his tension levels.

“Detectives, we’ll be there in five. Do not, repeat do not, enter until my signal. Confirm.”

“Yes.”

“Yes.”

“Yes.”

“Can’t we go faster?”

“Mr Castle, we’re going as fast as we can short of flight. If we rear-end a car, we’ll be out of the game. Detective Beckett is not being hung out to dry here. Ryan and Esposito are there, and O’Leary’s close. She’s doing the right things” –

_Ow!

_Get up, stupid slut._

“What was that?”

“I think she fell.”

_Move, bitch._

Noises of a door opening, and closing, on a sound of breathed out pain. No sound of a blow. Castle clings to that, even as his fists clench hard.

_Here she is._

_She’s older._ The voice is slick, educated, smooth: the discomforting undertone of a hiss. The accent is a little off –

“He’s not originally American.”

_I don’t like older. All the rest were younger. We’ve always gone for youth._

_But look at the photos. Even better than Paris._
Silence from both men.

Where’s thish? ‘S not my ‘partment.

Shut up.

Wha’m I doin’ here?

A nasty snigger.

Don’t worry, girlie. You’ll enjoy it.

Strip her. I want to see what I’m getting. Pause.

Wha’re you doin’? Shtoppit. Leggo.

The noise of hand striking flesh, and pain, and the whisper of fabric meeting floor.

Very nice, though you should have made sure she was in the photoshoot underwear. Let’s see the photos again?

Pause. There’s hurt breathing in the background.

Oh, yes, she’ll do just fine. Stand her up.

Wha’re you doin’? Don’t. Shtoppit, I don’ like you doin’ that. Lea’ me ‘lone.

“O’Leary, are you in position?”

“Just pullin’ up now. Where are you?”

“One minute. We don’t have much time. Detectives, out the cars and ready to go in on my mark.”

Oh, you’ve done well this time.

The van stops. Avery leaps out, Shaw following.

“Don’t be a hero, Mr Castle. Stay behind us.”

‘M cold.

We’ll warm you up. Just wait there.

Footsteps, fading and returning.

Whassat? No. No needles. No! There is the sharp splintering of glass.

“Go go go!” Shaw orders.

O’Leary hits the doors at speed. Resistance is minimal.

“NYPD! Hands behind your heads! On the ground!” Esposito yells, gun out.

“FBI. On the ground.”

Connor and the other man turn, horrified.
“Cassle? Cassle, wha’s goin’ on? I got all my shots.”

Castle gets a good look at Beckett. The only thing stopping him killing Connor is the presence of the cops and agents. There’s an already-livid bruise on her hip. She’s in panties and bra, and nothing else.

“‘M cold.”

“I’ve got you,” he says softly, and wraps his light jacket around her. It covers enough.

“On the ground!”

Connor tries to run. Ryan has him down in an instant, cuffing him ungently.

“What is this?” asks the other man. He’s older, suave, and trying to take command. “This young woman came of her own free will.”

“They gimme shots,” Beckett slurs, staggering as Castle holds her up.

“Really?” Shaw says coldly to the stranger. “Hands behind your back. You’re under arrest.”

“There must be some mistake.”

“Shaw, she says they injected her. We need to get her to an ER, now.”

“Shaw! Beckett’s out!”

“Detective O’Leary. Get the needle and get her to the nearest ER. Take Mr Castle with you.”

Castle and O’Leary are already out of the door as the last word is uttered, Beckett propped inelegantly between them, head dangling, feet dragging, barely conscious.

“You’ll believe a drugged-up model? She took it herself.”

“I’ll believe an NYPD detective working under cover and the recording of everything that’s happened since ten a.m. this morning,” Shaw says with considerable and vicious satisfaction.

“Detectives Ryan and Esposito, get these two into cells in Holding. We’ll start on them as soon as we’re all back.” She thinks for a moment. “Make sure your unit’s recording is on from the moment you unlock the vehicle. We don’t want any misunderstandings here.”

“This is all a mistake. I’ll have your badges for this.”

“You can try.”

“Where’s the nearest ER?”

“Mount Sinai West. Four minutes with lights and sirens.”

O’Leary already has them on and is moving. Castle, in the back with Beckett held against him, frighteningly, unpleasantly floppy and completely drained of consciousness, is glad he’d put both their seatbelts on, because O’Leary’s flinging the car round the corners like he’s on Indy 500 tracks.

The cruiser screeches to a halt at the ER entrance, O’Leary plucks Beckett from Castle’s fumbling
grip and runs inside with her. When Castle catches up, he’s already halfway through the explanation.

“…injected, probably heroin, on an undercover op. Police. Drink spiked. Not sure with what but I got a sample, and the needle.”

The ER machine swings into action. The needle and sample are rushed off, though O’Leary insists on following to preserve chain of custody. He’s last heard ordering everyone to wear gloves, which, since this is a medical facility, receives a very terse reminder that this is standard practice in an ER.

Castle is left with Beckett, already on a gurney but disturbingly pale. Her breathing is horribly shallow, and getting more so. An oxygen mask lands over her face. The remains of his jacket are ripped open and monitors attached. A collar goes around her neck. The attending assembles the necessary medications terrifyingly rapidly as he’s talking.

“Okay, she’s breathing.”

Beckett is wheeled into an examination room, Castle following. The attending takes a very brief history from him, being the only source of any information. He knows very little. He can only speak to his inadequate knowledge of the day’s events and the investigation’s inferences.

“So it’s most likely heroin injected, but you don’t really know that or how much. You think she managed to hit the needle away, and you think it was a dose to keep her high, not to kill her.” Castle nods, bleakly. The attending frowns. “Okay. Narcan now. We’ll deal with the rest when we know what it is.”

He injects the first dose. “We’ll give that two minutes,” he explains, checking his watch. “But the drink was spiked, and you don’t have any idea what with.”

“No,” he bites out. “Detective O’Leary went with the doctors who were going to try to identify everything.”

Two minutes, or maybe two eons, later, there’s no response. The doctor is checking her pupils and her head, and watching the monitors very closely. This is not producing any noticeable effect on Beckett but is terrifying Castle.

“Why isn’t it working?” Castle asks, frantic. “Shouldn’t it work?”

“We can repeat it, up to five times.” The doctor gives a second injection. Another two interminable minutes pass. Still nothing. But she’s still breathing on her own, under the mask.

The third injection has, finally, some effect. Beckett’s lashes flicker. Castle, by now holding her hand tightly enough that he can feel every last twitch, breathes a very long sigh of relief.

The next few moments are ugly. Beckett is violently sick, and then starts to shiver. A nurse brings another blanket, but it doesn’t seem to help. She whimperes, and shivers convulsively. Castle can’t stand it.

“Can’t I keep her warm?” he pleads with the doctor.

“’M cold,” she mutters. “Keep me warm.”

“How were you planning on that?” he asks sardonically. Castle treats it as a true question.
“Just hold her, in the blankets.”

The attending looks very sceptical.

“Want him to,” Beckett mumbles.

“Absolutely not,” the resident instructs. “I need to keep the monitoring on her. We haven’t sorted out what else she’s been given, and I’m not taking any risks. The Narcan may need re-administered.”

Beckett whimpers unhappily, and Castle takes her hand again, since he can’t do anything else. He has to protect her. Now, he’s allowed to protect her. She asked him to protect her. But when O’Leary returns, just for a moment or two – or, no, he won’t let go of Beckett: O’Leary can call Lanie and Lanie can pick up some clothes, or buy some sweats, and clean underwear. Definitely clean underwear.

Another doctor appears after a relatively short time, with O’Leary looming behind him. The mountain is not smiling.

“Flunitrazepam,” the doctor says, “also known as Rohypnol. Illegal in the US, but…” O’Leary rumbles threateningly, and the doctor refocuses. “We can’t do anything much about it, even though it was only taken an hour and a half ago. I’m afraid it will just have to wear off.”

*Only an hour and a half?* Castle thinks. This has all taken place in less than two hours? It feels like a lifetime.

“We’re going to keep you in. You’ll need to be monitored for at least the next several hours.”

“Case,” she complains. The doctor looks blankly at O’Leary and Castle.

“She wants to pursue the case. She was undercover.”

“No,” the doctor says very firmly. “She’s not going anywhere.” There is a feebly indignant noise from Beckett, which all three other people ignore. “We’ll get her into a room” –

“Private room,” Castle says firmly. “I’ll cover all costs her insurance doesn’t.”

“Whatever – and keep her under review.” He turns back to Beckett. “Okay, let’s get you installed.”

“Not furn’ture,” Beckett grumbles faintly. Shortly, an orderly appears, and she’s wheeled away before she can mumble any more complaints.

Castle looks at O’Leary questioningly. He’ll find out where Beckett is in a few moments. “So?” he asks.

“So, Shaw’ll have shoved ‘em into Holding by now, an’ we’ve enough to charge them, so we c’n hold them for as long as we need to.” The feral baring of teeth – definitely not a smile – indicates that O’Leary’s looking forward to that. “Beckett’ll get her chance to interrogate, ‘less she’s sicker than I hope. We’ve got a bit of tidyin’ up to do to get all the evidence properly assembled.”

“Okay. Can I help?”

“Naw. We don’t need theories, we got evidence. You make sure our girl there gets fixed.” Castle regards O’Leary with a hard stare. “Now, no call for that. It wasn’t a jab at you.”

O’Leary ambles off, and Castle marches off to find out where the hospital has hidden Beckett.
There's a place

After a brief conversation with the admin staff, Castle locates Beckett, eyes shut and now-dirty hair gel sliming all over the hospital pillow; photoshoot make-up already smudging, in a pleasant enough private room. A nurse is fussing around her.

“She fell,” Castle suddenly says, remembering. “Outside. I don’t know – I didn’t look at her properly so I don’t know if she’s hurt.”

“Okay,” the nurse says soothingly. “Let’s take a quick peek. Um… if you could give her some privacy just for a moment?”

“Wan’ him to stay.”

“I thought you were asleep.”

“No’ yet. Stay.”

The nurse shrugs indifferently. “She said it.” He gently draws back the blanket under which Beckett is huddled, and examines her legs. “Scraped knees.” The blanket is returned to cover her. “Let’s have a look at your hands.” He draws them out and turns them over, looking at the palms. “Hmm. Bit dirty, but no obvious cuts. I’ll get some things to clean them all up properly and make sure there’s nothing nasty in there.” He swings out.

“Did I hurt you when I was holding your hand?”


Castle locates a chair and purloins it for the much more important purpose of sitting next to Beckett, whose eyes have closed again, and holding her hand. He couldn’t honestly say she looks any better.

He finds his phone, and calls Lanie’s number.

“ME Parrish.”

“Lanie” –

“Castle? Why’re you calling me?” There is half a second’s silence, then Lanie makes the inevitable leap of logic. “What’s wrong with Kate?”

“Er… we’re at Mount Sinai West ER.”

“What?” Lanie screeches.

“She’ll be okay. But she needs clothes. Everything. Underwear, everything.”

“What happened?”

“Op went bad. Can you get some clothes for her?”

“No key.”

“Hell. Buy them, I’ll pay.”
“What happened?”

“Lanie, please, just get the damn clothes here! I’ll explain later.”

“You freakin’ well better explain. I’ll be there soon as I can.”

“Thanks. Bye.”

Shortly, the nurse comes back in to clean up her knees and palms.

A little later Lanie arrives, clutching a squishy bag which obviously contains some clothes. Castle exits Beckett's room to talk to her.

“Okay, spill,” she orders, without benefit of preliminaries such as hello, or how are you.

“Undercover op. Beckett went undercover as a model. Trapping the photographer. He spiked her drink and then they tried to inject her with heroin. And then she tripped out.”

“And now she’s in the ER,” Lanie says disgustedly. “Why didn’t you stop her?”

“Because the FBI threatened to handcuff me to the van if I got in the way. And she’d have shot me.”

“Which frightened you more?” Lanie teases.

Castle glares at her. “Not the time. Did you bring some clothes for her?”

Lanie drops the teasing. “Yeah. Everything, like you said. Three sets. If she’s not out by then, I’m sure you’ll buy” –

“Not out?”

“Castle, didn’t all your research teach you anything about overdoses?”

“No. Drug addicts don’t sell.”

“Trainspotting?” Lanie says acerbically.

“Except Trainspotting.”

“Right. They’ll need to keep her in for most of a day, minimum. The two drugs don’t go well together – they’re synergistic.”

“Oh. Beckett is not gonna like this.”

“Damn straight,” Lanie says. “Is she awake?”

“Not when you arrived.”

“I wanna see her. Did they let you stay in?”

“Yeah.”

Lanie’s hand is on the door when the resident arrives.

“Who are you?” he asks.
“Doctor” – emphasised – “Lanie Parrish. ME.”

“And your relationship to my patient?”

“Best friend.”

Their conversation descends into technical medical-speak, not one word of which makes the slightest sense to Castle. More annoyingly, when Lanie goes in Castle is left out. Not deliberately, but the two professionals appear to be having a difficult discussion. He looks at his watch.

*Oh, shit!*

It’s after nine. In fact, it’s almost ten. He hasn’t checked in at home; he doesn’t know if his mother is home or not; and Alexis…

This is really not going to be good at all. Whatever he does next will be wrong. But one wrong can be mitigated, and one cannot. He thinks very hard, and pulls out his phone.

“O’Leary, Castle.”

“How’s Beckett?”

The short pause says more than all of Castle’s extensive vocabulary.

“Like that.”

“She’ll be okay,” he manages. The day is beginning to crash in on him. “But I have to go home. My daughter… I can’t be out all night.”

“I see,” O’Leary says slowly.

“Do you?” Castle snaps, flicked on the raw by the hint of disapproval which in fact only exists in his own head. “Have you got a teen daughter? No? Then don’t you dare judge my choices. She’s not old enough to be left overnight. Got any better ideas? Bring her here, perhaps?”

“Okay,” O’Leary soothes. “I get it. You gotta go home. I get it. So you want me to come sit with Beckett?”

“Yeah.”

“Kay. Whyn’t you ask Espo? Or Ryan?”

“Because Beckett isn’t tight with them right now like she is with you and none of us need any more crap if I call them and they behave as dumb as they have been doing.”

“Could be as you’re right there,” O’Leary allows. “Okay. I’ll talk to them an’ we’ll cover tonight, iffen we’re allowed. If she raises a fuss, it was all your idea.”

“Okay. I’ll go try to tell her what’s happening.”

“Save your ass, more like,” O’Leary drawls, and cuts the call.

Castle enters the room rather tentatively to find Lanie and the resident still discussing technicalities.

“Um… I need to talk to Beckett,” he says, and instantly turns to the still figure on the bed. “I’ve got
to get home to Alexis,” he murmurs to her. “O’Leary and the boys are going to keep you company till I come back tomorrow morning.”

There’s a thin, pained sound, followed by, “Have to?”

“Yes. I don’t wanna, but I have to. I’ll be here tomorrow. You just sleep now.”

“No’ a baby.”

No, she’s not a baby. But he wants to baby her and take care of her and make sure everything is okay.

“No,” he whispers. “You’re my badass big brave cop.” He leaves a soft kiss on her forehead, and reluctantly departs.

He picks up a cab, and thanks to the time and some very lucky breaks with the traffic and the stop lights, is home in less than half an hour.

His mother is not home. He feels better for that: if she had been home he’d have beaten himself up for not simply calling… he could have called. He simply hadn’t thought of that, and now he has, he realises that he is unbelievably weary, in body and soul.

“Where were you, Dad?” Alexis yells accusingly from the top of the stairs.

“Mount Sinai West ER,” Castle says flatly, instantly antagonised by Alexis’s tone. She’d never used to be worried – even when he started following Beckett – by his random hours and late returns.

“What?”

“The ER,” Castle repeats, wearily. Alexis tumbles headlong down the stairs to him.

“Are you okay? What happened?”

“I’m fine,” Castle huffs out as Alexis removes his breath by crashing into him.

“Oh.”

The instant of caring affection vanishes like beer at a frat party. Unfortunately the results are not nearly as convivial.

“You waited around a hospital rather than coming home? I guess that was for Detective Beckett. She’s a cop. She’s used to getting hurt.”

“She’s not used to being given a heroin overdose,” Castle snaps.

“Heroin?” Alexis stops in her tracks. “How?”

“Undercover operation.” Castle thinks fast, and decides on the hard reality of the day. “She knew it was likely. She let herself get roofied so we took down a pair of serial rapist-murderers, but there was always a risk that they gave her heroin before anyone could stop it. And they did.” He pauses, meaningfully. “We all had to stay out till ordered in. I was kept out the way.”

Alexis stares at him, sheet white, turns round and flees upstairs. Castle considers the empty space where she had been, takes two steps towards the staircase, and then changes his mind and heads for
his study. A large belt of whiskey suddenly seems like the best possible plan.

The first taste of the liquor burns all the way down. Castle sets his alarm, recognising that tonight might be a time when nightmares and fears distort reality and leave him only attenuated exhaustion, short of restful sleep, and then continues to sip at his drink, staring into the night.

He’d never been on an undercover operation before. He’ll be only too happy if he is never on another one. The worst of it had been his uselessness. Sitting in the van, listening, unable to do anything – not allowed to do anything – and his Beckett being groped and leered at and contrasted by that sleazy rapist and then drugged and left overdosed.

And now he can’t even stay with her in the hospital, and has to leave it to the others. He pours the whiskey down his throat, and still he hears the insinuating, horrible commentary of the photographer, the hissing nastiness of the older man: both treating Beckett as just a piece of meat, to be used, abused, and butchered. He’s never mistreated a woman in his whole life, but he’s certainly appreciated plenty of lingerie shots. He’s likely never going to do that again. And the worst of it is, that even though it had been degradingly disgusting, he’d still been totally physically aroused by the sight. He hates himself for that, as much now as he had hours ago. Another gulp of whiskey goes down.

Whiskey doesn’t numb his feelings. As the level of the liquid drops in his glass, his glances toward his phone become more frequent, and somewhere in his exhausted, frazzled, and slightly sozzled brain the idea that he should call O’Leary becomes ever more insistent. A while after midnight, though he should have tried to sleep long before, he dials.

“O’Leary,” a sleepy bass scratches out.

“It’s Castle.”

“Wha’? What the hell? D’you know what time it is?”

“How’s Beckett?”

“Espo’s there. I was sleepin’.” A whale-sized yawn proves the point. “Why’re you callin’ anyways? Anythin’ wrong, an’ she wanted you, I’d have called you.” O’Leary cuts the call, presumably to return to the land of mountainous dreams.

Castle gazes at his phone unhappily. He knows he shouldn’t do this, and he also knows that it’s unlikely to improve any matters, but he can’t go to Mount Sinai until tomorrow and he can’t sleep without knowing what’s going on. Against that, he is still deeply pissed at Espo, who is pretty pissed at him right back again.

He delays, and tries to distract himself, and fails. All he can think of is Beckett, semi-naked and shivering, and then collapsing, and then the ER and oxygen and the tense, horrible moments until the medication kicked in. He can’t sleep.

He dials.

“What d’you want?”

“How’s Beckett?”

“Fine.”

“I was there in the ER when she wasn’t responding. Don’t give me fine like I shouldn’t be asking.”
There is a short, hostile silence.

“This isn’t about you or me, Espo. This is about Beckett. Just tell me how she is.”

“She’s breathin’. They come in, they check, they do nothin’, so I guess she’s fine. I ain’t a doctor.”

It’s no more friendly, but it is at least informative. It’s okay. Better than it could be.

“Thanks. Night.”

There is no answering courtesy farewell. Castle swipes off, his dark imaginings slightly alleviated, and seeks out some sleep. Nightmares pursue him, but when he wakes from them, he can reassure himself that Beckett is okay. Still, he spends longer in a hot shower than normal, and while he’s shaving notes that he’s bleary-eyed; dark circles betraying his disturbed night.

He makes breakfast, which Alexis attends without commentary of any sort. Castle, too tired to probe and too desperate to go back to the hospital to see for himself that Beckett is better, doesn’t open a conversation.

It doesn’t occur to him until he’s already halfway to the hospital that this morning Alexis had been much less hostile, if just as uncommunicative, compared with the previous week, and even then he doesn’t dwell on it.

When he arrives at Beckett’s room Esposito has been replaced by Ryan, which is a major improvement.

“Hey, Castle,” Ryan says. “Come to take over babysitting?”

There is a sleep-drowned growl from the bed. It appears that Beckett has attained a modicum of consciousness, though her eyes remain shut.

“I’m here,” he replies, which is not likely to produce more growling. “What’s going on?”

“We put them in Holding, and charged them with conspiracy to rape, attempted rape, and assault on a police officer. That’s for starters. Now you’re here, we’ll get on with linking them to the murders.” Ryan’s normally smooth face twists. “They’ll go down for life, since we can’t get them both the needle in New York. Though I guess San Francisco might want ‘em.”

“Hope so,” Castle, not normally a vindictive man, says fiercely.

“Um, man,” Ryan says very quietly, “you got a minute? Outside?”

“Oh?”

“Just a minute?”

Castle flicks a quick glance at the still form on the bed. Her breathing has deepened again. “Okay.”

They position themselves outside the door. “So what is it?” Castle asks.

“Er… Espo an’ me, we had a bit of a chat last night. He…he knows he’s been a bit of an asshole.”

“Might mean more if he told me himself,” Castle points out.

“He’s not here. I am. He’s out there on the case. Anyway, I think he wants to mend matters.”
“Do you? Did he tell you that I called last night, and he got pissy with me then? Who’s driving this, Ryan? Espo, or you?”

Ryan colours.

“I see.” Castle puts his hand on the door to go back inside.

“Look, man, this needs fixed.”

“Sure it does. But it’s not going to be fixed by you wishing for it. It’s down to Espo to get his head straight. I’m not kowtowing to his dumb prejudices and I’m not apologising for something I didn’t do.”

“But…”

“But nothing. You and Esposito jumped to conclusions without even asking what the facts were. It wasn’t even any of your business. I get that you might not have asked me, but even when Beckett’s told you enough Esposito’s still behaving like I’m Saddam Hussein. He caused this, he gets to mend it.”

Ryan droops.

“We’re okay,” Castle concedes. “But Esposito needs to straighten out. It’s up to him. I don’t need him.”

Ryan looks as if he wants to say yeah, we all know who you need, but fortunately refrains. “Seeya,” he says, and wanders out.

Castle returns to Beckett. She’s still ostensibly asleep, pale and drawn, one hand above the hospital blanket, monitors still attached, bleeping rhythmically. It’s almost reassuring. He shifts the chair so that he’s sitting right next to the bed, and takes her hand. There is a small squeeze.

“Are you awake?” he murmurs, and strokes his thumb over the back of her hand.

“Urgh.” He supposes that means yes.

“Good. I was a bit worried. You didn’t even complain when I was canoodling with you in the back of O’Leary’s cruiser.”

“Di’n’t.”

“You certainly didn’t complain,” Castle says mischievously.

“Di’n’t c’noodle.” She opens an eye. It’s not a glare: in fact her eyes are cloudy and rather unfocused. “Di’ we get ‘em?”

“Yes. Arrested. Shaw, Ryan, Esposito and O’Leary are making sure the evidence is all gathered and linked up.”

“Need to be there.”

“No, you don’t. They’ve got it all under control.”

“My case.”

“It’s your team, too.”
Beckett makes an attempt at sitting up. One of the monitors squawks loudly. A nurse comes in immediately.

“Lie down,” she says.

“My case.”

“You need to lie down and rest. You have to stay in for observation for at least another few hours, and the more you get excited the more likely it is that you’ll be in here for longer.” The nurse is briskly unsympathetic to Beckett’s professional concerns about her case, which are expressed in fuzzy, slurred speech which proves to everyone except Beckett that she is in no state to sit up, never mind get out of bed.

“Beckett, your team are fine without you for a day or two.”

“Wanna ‘terrogate,’” she slushes.

“I’m sure they’ll let you have a go.”

She slumps down, unhappy. Castle tightens his grip on her hand. “Just get better,” he says. “It’s only a few hours, if you do what they say, and then you’ll be allowed out again.” He looks very seriously at her. “We were really scared. O’Leary got you here in about four minutes. It took three injections before you came round. Please, just do what they ask.”

“Wanna talk to them.”

“You can’t even articulate clearly right now. Wait till later, when you don’t sound like you’ve been on a three-day bender.”

Beckett emits a cross, sulky noise, but her hand remains within his, and she’s still looking at him. He’s about to add some further reassurance, when his phone rings. The ringtone tells him it’s home, and, since he still has possession of her cellphone, it is therefore Alexis.

“Hey,” he says, which doesn’t give anything away to Beckett.

“Dad, where are you?”

“Hospital.”

“With Detective Beckett?”

Castle is surprised. For some time it’s been her, not Detective Beckett. “Yes,” he says cautiously.

“When will you be home?”

Now he’s astonished. Mostly, he’s astonished that she isn’t demanding his return instantly.

“I don’t know. Why?”

“Um… I want to talk to you?” Alexis sounds very young, suddenly.

“Do you?” He looks at Beckett, who doesn’t appear to be paying attention. “Okay. I’ll be back in an hour or so.”

“’Kay. Bye, Dad.”
“Bye.”
Beckett’s dark head is still turned away.

“Beckett?”

“Mm?”

“Are you awake?”

“Talk’n in my sleep,” she says, still a little slurred but far closer to her normal snark.

“Ha-ha. You must be feeling better.”

“Ugh.”

Castle slips his thumb over her hand again, soothing, gentle, reassuring. “I can stay for a while, but then I need to go home and talk to Alexis.” There is a small tension in the hand he’s holding. “I think she might have seen some sense.” No change, no movement, no answer. “And then I’ll come back.” A small relaxation. “Lanie brought you some clothes. If they let you out of bed for a shower, you’ll have clean underwear.”

“You’ve seen it?” she struggles out, yawning.

“Nope,” Castle says, smugly virtuous. “But you could show me it.”

There is a growl. He leans close to her ear. “After all, I’ve seen you in much less.” She winces, and he suddenly realises that that statement could be misconstrued. “Two nights ago, at yours. The shoot doesn’t count.”

“Saw that?” she wails.

Oh, shit. Castle thought she’d worked out that he would be able to see it. “Er… yes?” Beckett’s hand leaves his and she cringes under the covers. All he can see is the top of her head.

“Go ‘way.”

“Nope,” Castle says. He’s not letting this go unfixed. “You knew I was in the van. I knew you hated every last second of it and you wanted to gut Connor.” He grins suddenly. “Promise I’ll never buy you Coronal.” He crosses his fingers.

“Not buying me underwear,” she says indignantly, and heaves herself over, as if her head is too heavy for her neck, in order to glare at him.

“That’s my Beckett,” Castle says even more provocatively. She growls. It doesn’t contain a specific objection to the possessive pronoun, so Castle thinks that, all things considered, he’s likely to survive.

“Didn’t want you to see.”

“It’s not like you wanted to do it. It’s no worse than when you walked into the Russian mob’s poker game in a tiny little sweater pretending to be a dress. You had to do that to save the day” – “Save your ass” – “I would’ve been fine” – she makes a very rude noise – “anyway, it was the same thing and
“You just wanted to see me in underwear.”

“I already did, remember? You saw mine, too.” His voice segues into a velvety, low baritone seduction. “If you’ve forgotten, I’m sure I can remind you about it.”

“You’ll get thrown out.”

Her speech is now almost clear, though it lacks the crisp edge which it normally displays.

“Not now. I’m not into that sort of exhibitionism – are you?”

“You… you…” She descends into an indeterminately infuriated muttering.

“Now I know you’re feeling better,” Castle says. “That sounds like you usually do just before you maul my ear.”

There is a disgruntled humph. Castle glances at his watch.

“I need to go,” he says. “But I’ll be back after lunch, at the latest.”

Beckett’s hand reaches out to his and grips hard. She doesn’t say anything, though. Castle squeezes back, and then leans over and plants a soft kiss on her lips.

“Later, Beckett.” He stands, and then grins. “Try not to shoot any of the medical staff. They don’t like it.”

He’s pursued out by her fearsome growl.
“Alexis?” Castle calls as he shuts the loft door behind him. There’s a silence. For a dreadful moment he thinks that Alexis has suckered him into leaving bed-ridden Beckett without a reason, and then there’s a noise from upstairs and Alexis appears. He is quite unreasonably relieved, and somewhat guilty that he had, however briefly, thought that Alexis might have been game-playing again.

“Dad?”

“Yes. You said you wanted me to come home so you could talk to me. Here I am.”

Alexis trails down the stairs. Now he’s here, she doesn’t exactly seem eager to start. Castle sits down on the couch, being less authoritarian and confrontational than his study, and waits, peaceably. Much as he wants to force the pace, he realises that it would be counterproductive. She’s wringing her hands, and clearly hasn’t the faintest idea where to start. Castle still doesn’t try to help her. This is for Alexis to begin, and if he were to jump in, he wouldn’t get the proper story.

“Is Detective Beckett okay?” she eventually asks, uncertainly.

“Seems so.”

There is another uncomfortable pause.

“Why does she always have to be the hero?”

“How do you mean?”

“Everything you say about her and the whole way you wrote Nikki Heat. She’s always the hero.”

Castle considers his answer carefully.

“Nikki Heat is fictional. No-one wants to read or hear about the boring bits of cop work, like the endless paperwork. And a story needs a hero: a focal point. That doesn’t mean that real life is like that.” Alexis looks blank. “Pumpkin,” and he uses the pet name deliberately, “I don’t tell you about the boring bits. In fact, I don’t usually hang around for the boring bits. They’re no fun. So all you ever hear about are the exciting events. Like a TV series.”

Alexis manages a wan smile. “But she was the hero this time,” she tacks on.

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“The suspects were” – Castle knows this is not going to go down well even as he starts it – “picking out female victims from modelling agencies.” He leaves out the lingerie aspect. Alexis has enough problems with Beckett without adding that one. “Beckett’s team caught the original case. Turned out that it was linked to several other murders, and then because it looked like a serial killer the FBI got involved and took over.”

“Uh?”

“The other murders were in other states.”
“Oh.”

“They wanted an undercover operation. Beckett was the only woman in the team except for the FBI lead, and she couldn’t do it because she had to co-ordinate the operation.” Castle’s precis leaves out a huge amount of not-entirely-irrelevant detail.

“So she had to do it?”

“Yep. There wasn’t anyone else. She didn’t want to.”

“Oh.” Pause. “But she did it. Even though she knew she could get hurt?”

“Yes. That’s what being a cop’s about.”

There is a long silence.

“Why is she so freaking perfect?” Alexis wails. “She’s smart and gorgeous and successful and now she’s brave as well.”

“She’s hardly perfect,” Castle says dryly, thinking of a number of occasions where Beckett’s emotional intelligence has been somewhere six feet under, and a number of occasions where her temper has spectacularly got the better of her, usually at him.

“Compared to Mom she is.”

Castle can’t deny that. Compared to Meredith, a pet iguana would be a perfect human being.

“But she’s not your mom. Why are you worried about that?”

“Because she’s all I ever hear about. Mom hardly ever comes anyway and when she does she only wants to go shopping and get money out of you. You complain about Gina and Paula all the time. But everything you say about her is a compliment.”

“But she’s still not your mom,” Castle says, baffled.

“You don’t get it, do you?” Alexis cries. “You follow her round hoping she’ll date you and wanting to marry her” – Castle chokes – “so she would be my mom and how could I ever live up to that?”

“No, I don’t get it. I’m not even dating Beckett.” Well. That may not quite be true any more, but right now they’ve had one day in which the possibility of a relationship might have become manifest, albeit born from scorching, furiously angry argument and sex.

“You want to, though. You made it totally obvious.”

“Yes” – give Alexis the courtesy of that truth – “but what I don’t get is why – well, actually, two things: why when we’re not even dating you’re jumping straight to you’ll get married; and why you’re comparing your mom and yourself to Beckett at all.”

Alexis goes for the easy target: the soft underbelly of Castle’s apparent personality. “You never take things slowly. You dive right in without even looking just like you did with Gina and that woman at the CIA and probably Mom as well. You never think. You did it with going to the Twelfth at all because you were so desperate to date her. You’re totally impulsive and you never, ever think about the consequences. It’s pure dumb luck that you never get hurt and it’s pure dumb luck that you managed to bring me up at all” –
“Stop. That is simply not true. I thought I was in love with your mom and I was delighted we were having a baby. I did all the research and all the planning and thinking. Sure, you were an easy baby and an easy child, but I put the work in.”

“That’s not the point. I wasn’t a planned baby, was I? Mom got pregnant and you jumped straight in to marrying her.”

“If I hadn’t married her I’d never have got custody and I’d never have been able to look after you. Are you really saying you’d have preferred that?”

“No! But you’re not getting it.”

“What am I not getting this time?”

“Mom only got pregnant with me because you didn’t stop and think before” —

“Enough,” Castle says, his temper trembling on the precipice. He takes two long, slow breaths. “I am not discussing – No. We will discuss this. Contrary to your belief, we were using contraception. It failed. It happens. I wanted you, planned or not, and the best way to care for you, so I thought, was to get married and be a family.” He pauses to try to corral his temper. “It didn’t work out, but it wasn’t because of carelessness.” Not his carelessness, anyway. He’s never careless – oh, shit. Except two nights ago. Fuck. As if she didn’t have enough problems.

He refocuses on the instant problem. “It’s also not luck that I don’t get hurt. I wear a vest, I stay back, and I don’t take stupid risks.”

“You had a gun to your head on the very first case!”

“And I knew from the first instant that the safety catch was on.” Alexis fails to look in any way convinced. “I train and I take care. I’ve no intention of getting hurt – and I never have. You’re trying to overprotect me.” He breathes slowly, deeply, again. How long has this been building, while he hadn’t noticed? “I might not look to you as if I’ve thought about it, but I have. There’s a lot of time when you’re at school, or out, when you simply do not know what’s going on and what I’m doing. Nor should I need to tell you. It may look impulsive, but you should know that looks aren’t always reality – think of the page six stories.”

Alexis’s expression changes slightly. Castle had chosen his example very carefully; she is well aware that the stories on page six are not so much exaggerated as outright lies.

“Now, let’s talk about something else. You’ve said a couple of times that Beckett would be your mom. Apart from the point that we’re not dating: even if we were dating, and even if we eventually got married, that would be years away. By that time you’ll be in college. Why would Beckett need to be a mom to you? You’re sixteen, not six. You’d be an adult by then. You won’t need another mom.”

Alexis stares at him. It appears that the temporal logistics have never occurred to her.

“And you need to stop comparing yourself to Beckett. She has her strengths. You have yours. You’re different people, and expecting to have the same abilities and confidence as a thirty year old when you’re sixteen is dumb. Especially when the main reason she’s the way she is, is a result of her mother being murdered. You don’t want to follow that example. Your mom is irrelevant to the whole discussion, because Beckett is never going to replace her.”

Alexis is quiet. Castle looks at his watch, and stands up.
“Now, I’m going to fix us some lunch.”

“But she’s so good at everything,” Alexis wails. “How can I live up to that?”

“Why do you have to?”

“Because you won’t love me as much if I don’t,” she sobs.

Castle sits back down hard. “What?” he spurts out. “Where did you get that from? That’s total nonsense. Who told you that?” This is as insanely histrionic as his mother at her worst – or indeed as Meredith.

Oh. Surely not.

“What has your mom been saying to you?” he asks heavily.

“How did you” – Alexis starts.

“I didn’t, till you just told me. I guessed, though.” He sighs. “What did she say? And when?”

Alexis stares at the wall, rather than meet Castle’s gaze.

“Okay, why don’t I tell you what I think happened and you can tell me if I’m wrong.” She doesn’t answer. “My guess is that your mom saw the Cosmo cover and article, and got upset. Then she started to drop little comments into conversation or texts, and then you told her that you were doing the civics week at the precinct, and she wanted to hear about it as it went along. You thought she was actually taking an interest.”

Alexis nods, tears puddling muddily in her eyes. “I thought she was being supportive,” she gulps. “She actually wanted to talk to me. But…”

“But she made you feel bad. She made you think what you were doing wasn’t worthwhile, and that Beckett was having all the fun and you were just doing drudge work.”

“Ye-es. And it was all about how there was no point trying because no-one would ever realise it was me because they’d all think it was the real cops. But it… she didn’t say it like that. It was like, what a shame that all your hard work gets lost. Or that you totally spend all your time in the Archive and your dad’s out with the cops rather than helping you. All that stuff.”

“And along the way she gave you the impression that Beckett wanted to catch me,” Castle says, still heavy with suppressed annoyance. “Shame she didn’t know that Beckett couldn’t bear to speak to me between May and September, and all through that Cosmo shoot she wanted to make it a Glock shoot, right between my eyes.”

“She was nice to you when I was there,” Alexis contradicts.

“That was more than two months later. And whatever she might do any other time, she wouldn’t be nasty in front of you.”

“But it totally felt like what Mom was saying.”

Castle just bets it did. Meredith, true to type, didn’t want him, but didn’t want anyone else getting him.

“And then you went running into a blown up building and brought her back here and I just couldn’t bear it because she’s so freaking perfect and who wouldn’t love her more than me?”
“Your father, perhaps?” Castle says softly. “Nobody could ever mean the same to me as you do. Having a child is like nothing else, ever. Nothing breaks it. It doesn’t matter who else – not your mom, not your Grams, not Gina – you fall in love with, it’s different.”

He pats her hand. “You need time to think. Think about whether that’s everything, and if not, what else there is. I’m going to make lunch for us, but I’ll be here if you want anything.”

He doesn’t look behind him as she trails back upstairs and a door shuts, doesn’t listen to the gathering misery even though he can hear it, and perfectly certain that his daughter has an awful lot to think about and should be left to get on with it on her own. On balance, it’s – though awful – both understandable and, in time, forgivable. Hopeful, in fact.

He fixes a salad for lunch, calculating that Alexis might not come down when called and a salad can be eaten later, and, himself hungry, invites her to eat. Unsurprisingly, she doesn’t arrive; still less unsurprisingly, she says she’s not hungry and she’ll get something later.

“There’s salad in the fridge,” he calls. “I’m going back to the hospital.”

Alexis appears at the top of the stairs, somewhat tearstained. Castle doesn’t comment. “Will you,” she snuffles, “er… tell-her-I-hope-she’s-okay.” She disappears again.

Definitely hopeful.

Back at the hospital, Castle finds Beckett sitting up and disconsolately regarding her surroundings and the remains of some nasty-looking soup and the inevitable green Jell-O.

“I haven’t even got my phone,” she greets him. “I’ve got nothing to do.”

“You’ve got me to talk to,” Castle points out.

“I don’t like hospitals. I’m fine,” she sulks.

“Not yet, you aren’t. Just enjoy the rest.”

“I don’t like having nothing to do.”

“Read a book – preferably one of mine,” Castle smirks.

“Haven’t got a book.”

“Write a book,” he says mischievously.

“No paper. No pen. No inspiration.”

“What, Detective? No inspiration? Surely my ruggedly handsome face inspires you?”

“No.”

Castle makes a very childish face and pouts. “That’s mean.”

“I want to go home.”

“No, you don’t. You want to go to the precinct and work. Interrogate that pair of perpetrators.”

“No-one’s telling me what’s going on,” she complains. “I want to know.”
“Why didn’t you just ask them?”

“No phone.”

Castle thinks that it’s amazing how clearly one can hear the word idiot even when it hasn’t been articulated.

“How about I call O’Leary or Ryan on my phone, and you can talk to them. Maybe they’ll even know where your phone is.” He thinks back to the few frantic moments in the warehouse. “If you had it with you when you were taken to their lair, then someone’ll have picked it up along with your clothes.”

“Probably CSU, then,” she thinks aloud. “They might have finished with it, I guess.”

“You can ask.”

“Let’s call Ryan,” Beckett decides. Then she favours Castle with a very direct look. “Why shouldn’t I call Esposito?”

“You can if you want,” he evades.

Beckett’s look becomes piercing. “What happened? Did you and Espo have another argument? When?”

“Just because you can’t interrogate the suspects doesn’t mean you need to start on me,” he tries to deflect. It totally fails.

“So you did. When?”

“We didn’t argue.”

“Semantics” –

“So hot.”

“Shut up – you butted heads. Again. About me. Again. So what happened this time?”

“This interrogation thing you’ve got going on really doesn’t do it for me, you know,” Castle says plaintively. It has no effect on Beckett’s gimlet glare at all.

“You can tell me or I can call Espo.”

“No phone, remember – hey!”

He really shouldn’t have left his phone in reach. It’s gone. Beckett’s snatched it from the bedside and is already dialling.

“Stop,” he asks. Beckett’s fingers pause over the call button. “He was just a bit protective.” She scowls. “Didn’t want to talk to me at two a.m.”

“Hardly surprising,” she says dryly. “You probably woke him.”

“He was here.”

“What?” That’s been a distraction. He should have tried that line first. “What was Espo doing here – hang on. Who else was here?” Clearly she’s forgotten that he’d told her they would stay.
Castle looks conscious, and very probably very guilty.

“Did you put a babysitter detail on me?”

“Not exactly.” The dreaded Beckett left eyebrow rises. Even from a hospital bed that’s scary. “Just – so you had company.”

“I see. And why did you – I know it was you – think I might need any company?”

“Because you were given an overdose and I couldn’t stay and if you had nightmares and woke up someone would be there not just the doctors,” Castle blurts out in one breath.

“Oh.” Beckett colours delicately along her cheekbones. “Um. Um, that was really sweet.” Her hand steals over the covers and ends up next to his. Castle covers it. Her hand turns upwards to fold around his fingers, which in turn fold around hers, enveloping them.

At which point, naturally, a nurse bustles in to take readings and observations and write them all down. Tactfully, Castle withdraws for a few moments.

The nurse exits, Castle returns – and just as he’s about to take possession of Beckett’s hand again, Shaw, minus the normally ubiquitous Avery, arrives.

“I suppose I should have expected you to be here,” Shaw notes sardonically.

“Yep,” Castle replies. “Thought you were a profiler,” he adds, as sardonic as she.

“What’s happening?” Beckett says. “Tell me you’ve got some good news.”

Shaw smiles as sharply as a stiletto. “We’re still connecting the dots,” she says, “but we can hold them as long as I want to simply on the tape from the wire you had and the drugs they gave you. Excellent work, Detective.”

“Who was the other guy?” Castle asks.

“Other guy?” Beckett queries.

“You probably don’t remember,” Shaw points out, “since you were doped up on Rohypnol” –

“I was?”

“Connor spiked your drink.”

“Yeah, I think I got that bit. So roofies, hm? Ugh.”

“Right, well, that’d put you pretty much under by the time he got you to the warehouse that they were using.” She stops.

“Don’t remember that bit. What happened?”

Shaw looks at Castle, who looks blandly back at her. Shaw’s op, Shaw’s explanations.

“They took you to one of the warehouses by the cruise terminal. You fell, which bought us a couple of minutes. Connor hustled you inside, they stripped you down to your underwear, you argued and fought, so they tried to inject you with a syringe-full of heroin. You objected more, and put up a fight, so you only got a minimal dose before the syringe got broken.” Shaw regards Beckett carefully. “Even so, if Mr Castle and Detective O’Leary hadn’t got you here so fast, you’d
have been in a lot more trouble than you were.”

Castle watches the brisk, sparse recitation sink in. Finally Beckett nods. “Okay. So where are we with joining the dots?”

“We’ve linked Connor to the San Francisco and the Paris murders. On the wire, he’s saying he’d been to other places, so we’re trying to run those down. The other man had the burner phone that Connor had been calling, and if nothing else he was complicit in the heroin injection, but we’re hoping to place him in the same locations as Connor at the same times. DNA samples are with the labs.” She smiles acidly. “Detective O’Leary and I interrogated Connor. Detective Esposito and I interrogated the other man. Brian Sevenelms. Claims to be an international businessman with a web of companies. Avery’s following it up. We can always try for a RICO indictment too.”

“Like Al Capone’s tax,” Castle puts in.

“Yes.”

“So when you’re allowed out, Detective, there will most likely still be some work for you to do. I don’t think that this will be wrapped up in two days.”

“The lab’ll take a lot more than that long,” Beckett points out acerbically.

“Even our lab will take that long.”

“So we’ve got them.”

“Pretty much.”

Shaw departs, having delivered the news.

“We don’t need to call anyone now.”

“Yes, we do. I want my own phone. And something to do.” She looks at him. “You could go get my Kindle – oh. Oh, shit. Where’s my purse with my keys?” Looks like phoning Ryan is imperative. “I need to call the boys.”

Castle hands over his phone with only minor resignation.
There's no deal, partner

“Ryan, it’s Beckett.”

“What are you doing with Castle’s phone?”

“He’s here. Putting you on speaker.”

“Yo, Castle. Not got bored of the hospital yet?”

“I adore Jell-O,” Castle snips.

“Yeah, right. Why’re you calling?”

“I want my phone and my purse,” Beckett says, “and one of you must have taken them into evidence, or CSU did. I want them back so someone can go get me some things from my apartment. Can you find out if I can get them?”

“I’ll go get them for you,” Castle contradicts. “You have to stay here.”

“Lemme find out,” Ryan says cautiously. “I didn’t pick them up. I’ll find out and call you.”

“Call Castle. My phone’s in my purse.”

“Okay.”

“Thanks. Bye.”

She makes a disgruntled noise. Castle picks up her hand under the guise of retrieving the phone, and then doesn’t let go once he has. “Ryan’ll find them for you.” He grins. “You’ll shoot him if he doesn’t.”

“Hm.” Her gaze unfocuses for a moment. “Did you say earlier that you watched the photoshoot?” she says, out of nowhere.

Castle is recalled very abruptly not just to that reality but to another. “Er – before we get to that,” he forces out, his ears colouring in line with the rest of his face, “there’s something else.”

“Something else?” Beckett grits out. “What else?”

“Um… Thursday night… um… we… I… forgot…”

“Pill,” she says, her face flaming but her tone matter of fact.

Castle emits a long sigh of utter relief. “I’m sorry.”

“I hope that means you’re sorry you forgot, not sorry you” – she clamps her mouth closed as she realises what she’s saying and turns away. Castle turns her back, very gently, even now unsure of her state. Given that she’s just said something that under any normal circumstances would never have exited a corner of her head, never mind her mouth, he’s none too sure that she isn’t still under the influence, so to speak.

“Sorry I forgot. Not at all sorry about the rest.” He looks at her, desperate hope blooming unrequested in his eyes. “You –you don’t regret it?” Her head shakes. His hand tightens around
hers. He wants to gather her in, hold her close, but who knows what the monitors will do, and he certainly doesn’t want interrupted for the looming, difficult, conversation.

“The photoshoot,” he starts, retaining her hand. “I was in the van. We had the feed and the wires and the tracking device.” He diverts for a moment. “The FBI have some seriously cool toys.”

“The shoot,” Beckett recalls him, bleakly, to the point at issue.

“Yes, well, um... yes, I watched it. I hated it but I couldn’t not watch.” Her hand is limp in his.

“When they started setting up the scene it got worse and worse and I knew you’d hate it and then the way he was talking was just like a bad porn movie and that’s not how it should be for anyone and it was obvious you hated every minute but he couldn’t see it and I wanted to kill him.” He stops and regards her piteously. “But,” he forces out, because he has to tell the truth, “but it was so hot even though it was revolting and I hate that it was.”

There is silence. Castle slumps, his fingers dropping away from Beckett’s hand.

“I hated every single minute of it,” she says, and his heart cracks, because surely this is the end, before they’ve even begun. “I hated his sleazy, oily eyes and every word that he said. I wanted to kill him before the shoot even started, and every moment during it.” She stops. “I hate that you saw it, and heard him.”

And then she reaches for his hand again. “And what helped get me through” – she hitches – “was remembering what it feels like” – another hesitation – “when it was you.” And a gulp. “When it’s something more than high-class porn.” She’s turned away again, as if the truth is too much to give, hanging there sharp on the bleach tainted hospital air.

For a minute Castle doesn’t, can’t, react. Then he pulls her back to him and simply clasps her tight in and damn the monitors, frantically kissing her hair, all that he can reach with her face buried in his chest. He thinks she might be crying, emotional release from the whole horrible situation. If she’s not, she’s certainly shuddering as if she is.

He strokes comfortably over her back in the hospital gown – no nightwear: he and Lanie had forgotten that. If she has to stay in another night, when Ryan brings her purse, he’ll go get her something from her apartment – and continues to hold her close until her shudders lessen and her shaking stops and she’s still there, his Beckett. Amazingly, the monitors haven’t squawked, and no-one’s interrupted.

“I never want to do that again,” she mutters into his collarbone.

“Hope you’ll never have to,” Castle mutters back, into her hair.

At which point, very unhelpfully, Esposito marches in, carrying Beckett’s purse. It doesn’t suit him.

Ryan puts the phone down on Saturday morning, after he’d been harassing the lab, and slopes off to the break room to make himself a coffee. He’s been thinking for some time, but only part of it involves the case. Not that he wants to let that go, no way, because these sonsabitches are going down for life and they’re gonna make it happen; and he knows better than anyone what it feels like to be doing things that go against the whole of who you are in pursuit of an undercover operation and a greater goal; but... there’s another problem to solve here, and it’s his partner.

He hadn’t exactly been comfortable talking to Castle earlier. Castle, Ryan thinks bitterly, is far too smart and far too good at spotting lies, evasions, and emotional matters than any guy ought to be.
He’d only been trying to fix things, and Castle had caught every last… um… okay. Lie. But he’d meant well. He just wants everyone to be pals again.

And it hadn’t exactly all been lies. Sure, Espo hadn’t said that he’d been an asshole, exactly. But he had sort of said that he didn’t like Beckett being angry with him, and he’d sort of said that he wished he hadn’t got her so riled up, and if you put it all together it adds up to I’m sorry I was an asshole. And that’s not a long step towards Espo wanting to mend matters, now is it?

So Castle had no right to pick up all the minor little elisions and make him feel even guiltier than he does. Ryan is still very, very worried by Beckett’s reaction when they were only trying to help; and yes, okay, they were wrong, but she’d really taken them apart for it, and he thinks that everything won’t be back to normal till…

Till Espo gets his head out of his ass. That’s what’s at the core of this. Espo got all protective of Beckett, who doesn’t exactly need it and certainly doesn’t want it, and then took it out on Castle. And he, Ryan, went along with it, which he shouldn’t have done, but Espo’s been his pal and partner since he joined this team and Ryan trusts him like he trusts himself.

This time, though, Espo got it wrong, big time. Castle might have been harsh, but in the end he’s probably – Ryan winces at the admission – right. Castle shouldn’t have to make amends, because he’s nothing to make amends for. Not to them, anyway. To Beckett? Well, there’s a question, too, because they hadn’t been getting on at all for weeks, but Beckett had still ripped him and Espo to shreds and danced on the pieces. And then O’Leary had got his oversized self involved, and what’s all that about, and then they’d at least managed to be sorta pals. And then Espo opened his big fat mouth again and Beckett had handed him his head and stomped out; and Espo had ripped up at Castle who’d ripped right back again and stomped out – and then Beckett and Castle had come back together looking like the cats who got the cream.

Of course, there wasn’t any mistaking what happened in that warehouse, either. So whatever was wrong, they fixed it. Castle had gone in with murder in his eyes and only been diverted because he’d gone straight to cover Beckett up and then gone to the ER, and pretty much he seems to’ve been there ever since.

None of that fixes Espo, though. Ryan drains his coffee and automatically makes another one, and wonders what Castle had meant by Espo got pissy with me. Unhappily, the only way of finding out is to ask one of them, but he’s not keen on that at all.

While he’s thinking, O’Leary ambles in, still pretending he’s a haystack and about as dumb, which Ryan thinks is getting real old, real quick.

“You guys give good coffee,” he grins. “I need that. Got woken in the middle of the night.”

“Yeah?”


“You did what?”

“Told him to call the man on the scene, an’ that was Esposito.”

“Like that was ever gonna go well.”

“Mm?” O’Leary hums. The noise reminds Ryan that he hates all flying buzzing insects.
“All that your idea got was Espo getting pissy with Castle. Didn’t fix anything.”

O’Leary shrugs. Small mountains move under his shirt. “It was worth a go,” he says. “Might’ve worked.”

“Yeah, pouring gas on bonfires always works,” Ryan says bitterly.

“Waal” –

“C’mon, quit it with the hayseed. We all know you got a brain.” O’Leary looks quizzical. “You worked with Beckett. Everyone who works with her got a brain. Drop the hayseed shit. It’s getting boring.”

“I find it puts some guys at their ease,” O’Leary says mildly, without the down-home drawl and with considerably more apparent intelligence. “If you’re as big as me, you get a lot of shit if you don’t do somethin’.”

“Just cut it out,” Ryan says crossly. “It’s annoying.”

“Okay,” he says amiably. “Now, whyn’t you tell me what you mean by Esposito gettin’ pissy with Castle. I don’t like people gettin’ pissy with my pals without a good reason.”

“Dunno. Castle didn’t tell me, and he’s not here.”

“Sure he’s not. He’s keepin’ Beckett comp’ny.”

“Don’t you mean keeping company with Beckett?” Ryan snips.

“Mebbe so. But you still didn’t tell me, so I guess we’d better ask the other one.” O’Leary turns and pokes his moose-sized head out of the break room door. “Esposito, want a coffee?”

Ryan just knows this is going to be horrible, and somehow it’ll all be his fault again.

Esposito tromps in, not looking particularly cheerful or indeed awake. “Yo,” he emits darkly.

“Espresso?” asks Ryan, attuned to his partner’s preferences.

“Thanks, bro.”

Ryan turns to the machine to make it, and hopes fervently, with no expectation of success at all, that this will protect him.

“Hear you got disturbed when you were watchin’ over Beckett.”

“Did you?”

“Hear you weren’t cool about it.”

“Did you?” Espo bats back, more annoyed. He scowls. “Guess you heard wrong.”

“So what should I have heard?” O’Leary says, and puts one enormous hand on the door to keep it closed. Ryan tries to squinch himself into a corner.

“How’s that your business?”

“’Cause I told Castle to ring you seein’ as you were there, an’ Beckett’s been my pal since she was
a rookie, an’ she ‘n’ Castle – who I think is a pretty good guy – are good for each other. So if you’re tryin’ to screw that up, you ‘n’ me have a problem.”

Ryan squinches even smaller, and hopes he can duck any flying things, such as punches, or mugs, or – looking at O’Leary – coffee machines and tables or chairs. Or walls.

“He ain’t good for her. He’s just messin’ her around.”

“Yeah. ‘Cause guys who’re just messin’ around run into burnin’ buildings and creepy warehouses an’ live fire situations all the time, don’t they?” O’Leary drills a glare into Esposito’s face. “Ain’t we already had this conversation? What’s your problem with Castle?”

“He keeps upsettin’ her.”

“Up to her what she does about that.”

“He went pryin’ into her mom’s case.”

Ryan makes a very surprised and loud noise. “Espo, you” – he says, and stops cold.

“Mm?” hums O’Leary, in a very interrogative tone. Ryan thinks dismally of a swarm of angry bees, all heading straight for him. “Espo what?”

Ryan opens and closes his mouth. Beckett doesn’t know this, and he’d rather hoped and prayed she never would, because she will not be happy.


“Espo let Castle read Beckett’s mom’s file,” Ryan rushes out.

There is a deadly silence.

“Ah,” O’Leary says, after far too short a pause for anyone’s liking. “I get it. So you” – he’s looking at Esposito – “helped Castle find out what’d happened to her mom, Castle thought he’d try ‘n’ solve it, Beckett didn’t like it, and you’ve been sore about it ever since an’ guilty because you screwed up an’ she don’t know it an’ only blamed Castle.” He acquires an expression of some disgust. “So instead of ownin’ up to your own part, you’ve been gettin’ pissy” – that has a very nasty edge – “with the guy who took all the blame. I get it.”

He favours Esposito with another gaze of disgusted disappointment. “Thought you were a better man than that. Guess not.”

On which scarifying note, he exits.

“What the fuck you say that for?” Esposito bites.

But Ryan has had enough. “Because you’re being an asshole an’ you aren’t the guy I thought was my partner and pal. You’re behaving like shit an’ I’m not covering for it any more. You can stew in your own damn juice. I should never have gone along with you an’ I’m not doing it any more. Till you get your head out your ass I don’t wanna know.”

Ryan stalks out the break room, leaving Esposito staring, horrified, at the departing back of his partner. If they are partners any more. It didn’t sound like it. Suddenly, he feels very alone.

Outside in the bullpen Ryan puts his head down and doesn’t talk to anyone at all. It might have had to have been said, but Espo’s been his partner for years now and laying down the law like that
hurts. For a moment he, too, wishes Castle had never, ever shown up in their collective cop lives, and then he remembers how Castle had looked in the warehouse, and how he’d looked this morning at the hospital, and he knows he’s wrong. He concentrates very hard on the case: footage has come through and he can simply look at that and not at anything else.

Using Beckett’s desk, O’Leary puts all of the messed-up matters out of his capacious mind and starts tracing the Coronal shoots against both Connor and Sevenelms’s movements, courtesy of flight and immigration records. It’s all stacking up very nicely, and soon he’s going to have a list of police departments with whom he will have some cosy chats about evidence and possible clearances of old cases. Everyone likes it when that happens. Probably even foreigners like the cops of San Francisco like it.

The bullpen is still dead quiet some time later when Ryan’s phone rings. Seeing as it’s Castle, he wanders elsewhere to take the call. When he’s done, he wanders back.

“Beckett wants her purse,” he says very neutrally to the bullpen at large. “Did anyone see it taken into evidence?”

“Naw,” O’Leary says. “Want me to call CSU?”

“I will,” Esposito says. Nobody comments. He dials, speaks for a few moments, and cuts the call. “They’re done with it. I’m going to get it.” Again, nobody comments, very loudly. He stalks out, trailing black mood.

“Think he’s gonna apologise?”

“Don’t know. Right now, don’t care.”

Ryan turns his shoulder on O’Leary and the bullpen both.

O’Leary considers matters behind his immense forehead. He’s more than a little disappointed in Esposito. He’d thought he was a straight-up guy, but he’s ducked his conscience this time. Still, he’s getting Beckett’s purse, so just maybe he’s going to do the right thing – this time. Even O’Leary’s natural cheer is not entirely adequate to sincere belief that it will all work out.

“I got your purse,” Esposito announces. He does not sound like a happy man. He drops Beckett’s smallish purse on the bed next to her. She scrabbles in it and locates her phone and keys. Esposito stands, exuding uncertain bleak misery and a sulking blackness. It seems to her that he wants to say something but either doesn’t want to or doesn’t know how to. Or maybe it’s both.

Castle looks between Beckett and Esposito, and decides quite rapidly that this is a place he doesn’t need to be.

“What do you want from your apartment, Beckett?”

She flicks him a piercing look, which swiftly alters to understanding. “Kindle, please. It’s on the couch.” She glares Esposito back a few steps, and drops her voice. “And my own pyjamas. They’re in the top drawer of my bedroom bureau.”

“Sure,” Castle agrees without surprise, though he is certainly surprised. “Anything else?”

“No. I think Lanie got me enough of the rest.”

“Okay. See you later.” He’s almost certain that Esposito growls darkly, but he ignores it. And
“Thanks for bringing my purse.”

“’S okay.” He runs down, then starts again. “You look crap.”

“Thanks. Getting roofied and given an overdose isn’t any fun.”

“Thought people paid to get a shot of heroin? They’d’ve wanted to be you.”

Beckett snickers, rather wanly. “Not me. I didn’t like it at all.”

“We got them, though.”

“Good.” She sinks back into her pillows. “I asked Ryan about my purse,” she says tiredly, “so how come you’re here with it?”

“Said I’d bring it. I got it from CSU.”

Beckett regards him coolly. “I didn’t have you down as the sort of guy who’d carry my purse. So what did you want to say to me? Even half-doped I can tell you got that I wanna tell you something look. Spill.”

Esposito doesn’t.

“Okay, I’ll start. This is about you and Castle, isn’t it? You’ve been sniping at him ever since my apartment blew up and you claim it’s because he wouldn’t date me. I told you what I thought of that and that hasn’t changed. You keep your nose out my private life.” She watches Esposito very carefully as she says the next words. “But that’s not all of it, is it?” There is a tiny, but still discernible, wince. “It’s not. There’s something else.” She thinks hard through her still slightly fuzzed mind. “You weren’t too friendly when he came back after the summer. Nobody was. But most of us got over it. Mostly. Except you.” She watches more carefully still.

“What’s really up, Espo?”

“I got Castle into your mom’s file.”
“You did what? You gave him it?” Beckett stares at Esposito. That had never occurred to her. She’d assumed it had been a bribable desk sergeant, or indeed uniform, who’d simply let him into the Archives without asking any questions. “You?”

Esposito nods.

“Why?” She stops. “No. I don’t want to know why now. Just get out. I don’t want to see you.” Esposito stands stock still. “Out!”

He leaves so fast that the linoleum floor ought to have scars. Beckett stares after him, shocked cold. Esposito had let Castle have her mom’s file? And then Castle had – of course – seen how thin it was and gone digging. But if Esposito hadn’t given him it in the first place…

She slides down under the blankets and buries her face in the pillows. Suddenly, the day is just too much to cope with. Possibly it’s the remnants of the drugs. Possibly it’s just the effect of finding out another revelation that turns her view of events upside down. The last one had been rather less devastating. Teens doing dumb things is – well, teenage. Castle’s misconceptions, and her own, stemmed straight from that, and they’ve mostly fixed it.

Esposito helping Castle to pry into her history is a whole different thing. And yet, if he’d admitted it when she’d stormed away from Castle in the hospital in May, she’d have forgiven him. Maybe even both of them. But he hadn’t, and had let her think that Castle had acted alone, and all her ire and pain had fallen upon Castle.

She lies there, still and cold, and falls into unhappy sleep. Nurses come and go to take the observations; Castle returns, sees her sleeping and leaves her pyjamas, keys and Kindle by her bed, departing himself to let her rest; prevailing with wicked charm upon a nurse who really doesn’t know why she let his big blue eyes and winning smile persuade her to call him when Beckett wakes up. The nurse hasn’t even read any of his books. Maybe she should.

When she wakens, she’s logy and sluggish, and alone. The monitors have largely been detached. She discovers that she has a bell to summon a nurse, and does so.

“Can I get a shower?” she asks.

“Sure thing. Bathroom’s just there. Take care, now. If you feel faint or dizzy or wobbly, sit down right away. No being brave here, Detective.”

Beckett finds a small but well-appointed bathroom and takes advantage of all of the facilities, slowly and carefully. The cuts on her knees sting even under the water, and she hisses when she soaps them. The shower, and a chance to wash the remains of gel and make up off, however, improves her mood from glacier-bleak to merely miserable. She rinses her hair and body, feeling as if the worst of the taint of the whole photoshoot is sloughing from her with the dirty water running down the drain, and then washes her hair and whole body all over again for good measure. Finally she thinks she’s clean. Physically.

Mentally, she – now she’s alone – isn’t nearly as sure. She can’t get the dirty, degrading words out of her head. It had been fine when someone else was there. Fine when Castle was there, or when she was still half-doped. Now she’s stone cold sober – thanks, Esposito – and all the memories of this shoot and so many more are crowding into her head. She dries herself, puts on her own
pyjamas, and crawls back into the bed, curling round into a small, tight ball: closed and defensive. She would really like Castle to be here right now, just to hold her hand. Just to hold her.

So many memories. So many memories: rushing towards her, breaking over her, overwhelming her. Clothes shoots: *look flirty, get up close, pout, smile, look sexy, press into him, open another button*. The dresser, pawing and stroking and too handsy. Just another piece of teenage meat, to be flirted and felt up and – given half a chance – fucked. She never had: never fell into that trap. Not that it wasn’t suggested, though. Oh no. *C’mon, it’ll be fun. You’ll enjoy it. Come’n find out what a real man can do.* And too much, too close: hot foetid breath and damp hands, prying and poking and only a whisker from active assault.

She doesn’t realise she’s shuddering: thinks she’s cold and huddles under the covers; pushing back the memories till she falls asleep again; tired and worn from the drugs. Nightmares pursue her. She wakes briefly, drinks, manages a half-smile for the nurse, and sleeps again.

She wakes with a gasp, halfway to a scream, when someone touches her.

Esposito returns to the bullpen with a face as dark as a thundercloud and a temper to match. He slams into his chair and buries his head in his papers. No-one approaches him. O’Leary exchanges a glance with Ryan, who shakes his head discouragingly. Esposito, therefore, is left alone with his foul mood until he should indicate that he’s capable of a conversation that doesn’t involve his gun doing the talking.

Into the evening, by which time Esposito has said not two words in total since he returned, Ryan and O’Leary have, by dint of shared glances and a few gestures, agreed that they have had enough of the situation.

“C’mon, Espo. We’re all going to a bar. You look like you need a drink or three.”

“I hear you got a hard head, but I don’t reckon it’s harder’n mine,” O’Leary adds, appealing to Esposito’s competitive spirit.

Esposito grunts blackly. It’s not enthusiastic assent. The other two men ignore it, since it’s also not a refusal.

“C’mon.”

“Iffen you don’t stand up and walk, I c’n always pick you up ‘n’ carry you.”

Esposito glares more blackly still. “Don’t want a drink.”

“I didn’t say you wanted it, I said you looked like you needed it. C’mon, man. You went to give Beckett her purse an’ now you aren’t talking to anyone.”

“Like you wanna talk to me anyway,” Esposito growls. “You ain’t been behavin’ like my partner.”

Ryan glares back. “I want the partner I thought I had. You know, the one who does the right thing? Not the one who let someone else take all the blame and stood by.”

There’s a short pause, broken by O’Leary.

“Iffen I’d been asked, I’d’a said you went to ‘fess up to Beckett – an’ it didn’t go so good. If you did that, then you deserve a drink. Can’t’ve been easy.”
“Naw,” drags Esposito.


Esposito shrugs miserably. “Didn’t go well.” He stands up and follows them out, dragging his feet and his temper.

Safely ensconced in a very male-dominated bar, which, despite O’Leary’s strenuous suggestions, is not Molloys, and where there is no risk of anyone being thought to be unmanly no matter the subject to be discussed, beers are obtained in quantity. For a short while, there is silence, broken only by the glugging of beer bottles being emptied. The weight of expectation presses ever closer around Esposito, until finally he cracks.

“She threw me out,” he drops into the waiting quiet. “Said she didn’t wanna see me. Didn’t wanna know why.”

The other two wince in reflexive sympathy. O’Leary is only vaguely sympathetic, never having experienced Beckett in murderous mode. Ryan, having suffered it much more recently, is better informed.

“Least she knows the truth,” he offers. Esposito nods heavily. “She’ll come round. You just gotta explain why.”

“How’m I gonna do that if she won’t let me?”

“She will,” Ryan says confidently. “She just needs time to digest.”

“Might help if you stopped bitchin’ at Castle,” O’Leary mentions.

Esposito scowls. “Knew you’d drag that in.”

“It’s where it all came from,” O’Leary points out, dropping his normal ambulant haystack mien. “If you hadn’t decided to get pissy with him for upsettin’ Beckett when you’d helped him do it, and then carried on bein’ pissy without findin’ out any facts, then Beckett wouldn’t have got into any of this in the first place. An’ now, I reckon she’s wonderin’ if she can trust anythin’ either of you do or say. So if you want this fixed, you’re gonna have to swallow that pride of yours an’ fix things with Castle first.”

Esposito growls, and redescends into dark, uncommunicative gloom. Ryan and O’Leary drink their beers and talk about sport. Esposito glowers into his drink, and doesn’t talk about anything.

Castle had gone home until Beckett should waken. On the way, he puts in a nervy call to Lanie to try to understand all this sleep, who tells him not to worry about it: she’s getting the dope out of her system.

At home, the salad has diminished in quantity, and his mother is also home. Alexis is missing, which is not unexpected, but although his mother is brandishing the script for Annie and occasionally reciting her lines, when he wanders over, he finds her in possession of a large glass of red and a worried expression.

“What’s up?” he asks. “Agatha consuming you?”

“You make her sound like a cannibal, kiddo. She didn’t eat the children, just hated them.”
“True. That was the witch with the gingerbread house, which I presume will be your next role? Anyway, why are you tossing back my good red wine at six p.m.?”

“A Alexis apologised to me.” Castle stares at her. “And explained all of that bitchy ex of yours’ machinations” –

“There’s a reason she’s my ex” –

“It’s not a good situation, darling.”

“Tell me something I don’t know.”

“Look, Alexis has apologised to me.”

“Good. She asked me to tell Beckett she – Alexis – hoped Beckett was okay.”

“What did Katherine say?”

“She was asleep. I haven’t had a chance to tell her yet.”

“Are you going back to the hospital?”

“Not till she’s woken up.”

Martha looks sidelong at him. “When has that ever stopped you before?” she says sardonically.

“Whenever Alexis might need me,” Castle points out, which silences his mother, since it’s so self-evidently true.

At which point Alexis trudges down the stairs, the epitome of misery.

“What’s wrong, pumpkin?”

“I…” she looks at Castle and Martha, turns round and flees back upstairs. Castle looks at Martha, who shrugs.

“Your daughter, kiddo. Your problem.”

Castle follows his daughter upstairs and finds her face down on her bed clutching her old stuffed toy and crying. He sits down next to her and tentatively pats her heaving shoulders. It doesn’t seem to help. Gradually words become apparent through the sobs. Most of the words seem to be sorry. Some of them are I’m so horrible. All of it appears to be filtered through the normal teen insecurity and dramatics of a just-sixteen year old.

Castle picks his bedraggled daughter up as if she were still a small child and hugs her. “There, there,” he says soothingly.

“I was so totally horrible,” Alexis wails.

“Yes,” Castle says bluntly. “You were, but now you’ve realised it.”

She sobs harder. Castle pats her back as she sits next to him, bent over. Blunt words, but he still loves her: she’s his daughter, and a moment’s stupidity doesn’t change that. Especially when it’s been deliberately induced and fed by Meredith.

“You’ll hate me.”
“No. Not possible. I can’t say I like your behaviour” – more blunt truth: he abhors her behaviour –
“but we can deal with that. You know what you need to do.”

“I can’t.”

“Why not? You’ve always done the right thing when you’ve messed up before. Why can’t you?”
Alexis’s face flames and she tries to hide further into her stomach. “She won’t want to listen. She
won’t even see me.”

“How do you know?”

Though it’s a possibility. A strong possibility.

“Nobody would.”

“I did. Grams did.”

“You’re family. She’s not. I wouldn’t want to talk to me if I was her.” She snuffles disgustingly.
Castle passes her a Kleenex, and only just stops himself saying Blow. “I can’t face her.”

Castle’s phone rings, which he ignores. “You won’t be any happier till you do, pumpkin. You
know that.”

“I can’t.”

Castle shrugs. “I can’t help you, then.”

“But you’re my dad.”

“Yes, but I can’t make matters better between you and Beckett. That’s between you two, and until
you make amends it’s not going to be possible.” Just like Ryan can’t make matters better between
him and Esposito, till Esposito makes some amends.

“But I can’t bear to face her and she’ll think I’m such a total failure.”

Castle thinks for a moment. “You have to decide if she’ll think you’re a bigger failure for doing it
in the first place or for not fixing it when you had the chance. If, of course, you’re more worried
about your own feelings and embarrassment than actually fixing it. Because that’s what it sounds
like.”

Alexis reacts as if he’d poked her with a cattle prod, which had rather been Castle’s intention.
Alexis is quite old enough to take the rough consequences of her own actions, and he’s not inclined
to let her off lightly. The thought of what might have happened if Dunn had conveniently run
across Beckett when she was apartment-hunting still gives him cold chills.

“I’m not!”

“Are you sure? Everything you’re saying is how you can’t talk to her and can’t face her because of
what she’ll think of you. You don’t know what she’ll think of you, you’re just speculating. That
says to me that you’re more worried about your reputation than doing the right thing. You need to
think that through. We can talk more later.”

He pats her back again, hugs her, and leaves Alexis to her thoughts.

Downstairs once more, he looks at his phone, listens to the message, and takes off to the hospital
like a scalded cat.

Entering Beckett’s room, it seems that in the time between the nurse ringing and Castle arriving, Beckett has fallen asleep again. Castle pads softly over to the bed, and is not at all reassured by the pinched, tight misery on her face, nor the slight traces of tears. He would otherwise have been happy to see that she’s managed to wash away the remaining traces of the hair gel and thick makeup. He looks for a moment at the side of her bare face, but she doesn’t turn over and watching a small patch of cheek and a stray eyelash is not fulfilling. He reaches out and lays a gentle hand on her shoulder.

She jerks awake with a terrified noise, more scream than gasp: and pulls hard away from him.

“Beckett?”

“Oh, Castle. It’s you.” She eases back to a state of moderate relaxation, but her eyes are still darting about the room, as if she expected someone else.

“What was that all about?”

“Nightmare,” she says laconically.

“Oh,” says Castle, and thinks the more. In default of uttering anything stupid, he shifts the chair back up to the bed, sits on it, and both places an arm around her shoulders and clasps her other hand. “There. Nice and cosy.” To his considerable relief, she snuggles in slightly.

“Have they said when you’ll be released?”

“Not yet. But they let me have a shower, so maybe tonight. When they come in to do their observations I’ll ask.”

“Will you be okay at home?”

“Home? If I’m let out I’ll be back at the precinct tomorrow, so we can get these guys put away for good.”

“Have you cleared that with Montgomery?”

“No, but he won’t object. All clear-ups are good.” She makes a face. “He might make me stay on desk duty for a day or two, I guess.”

“I’m sure you’ll get a chance to interrogate them.”

“Good. There are a few more things I wanna do,” she says viciously. “Selwyn needs to know that the dresser is a handsy sonofabitch.” She bares her teeth. “That’s not gonna go down well with his whiter-than-white reputation.”

“He was?”

“Oh, yes,” Beckett grates. “Wasn’t interested in basic good manners, that’s for sure. We’ll see how he likes it when he finds out who he was feeling up.”

Castle’s face is dark. “Want some help?” he asks tightly.

“You can hold my coat,” she says. “I’m going to show that dresser a really good time.” She bares her teeth in a feral non-smile once more. “That's what he said he wanted. I'll have a really good time. He won’t.”
Castle would rather like to provide more – er – physical help than simply holding Beckett’s coat, but he is suddenly, appallingly reminded of Shaw’s words in the van: She doesn’t need your protection. No. And he can see that this is important to her, not just as part of the case. She needs to have this handsy dresser dealt with – permanently.

“Okay,” he says. “But you have to promise that I get to be there when you interrogate him – and when you bring him in. I wanna see his face when he realises.”

“Sure. Wouldn’t want you to miss it.”

Her brief ferocity over, she sags back into his arm and the pillows. Castle hugs her carefully.

“When are the next observations due?”

“Don’t know. Soon, I hope. I wanna go home.”

Home? That bleak, chilly apartment is home? She’d never had the chance to get her gun safe or table, either, he thinks trivially. She hadn’t planned on spending Saturday in a hospital bed.

“I could take you,” he says.

She opens her mouth, then closes it, any words unsaid. He doesn’t press the point, and she eases further. Peace descends.

“I’d like that,” she emits, out of the blue, and it takes Castle a few seconds to catch up.

“Okay. Shall I go get my car?”

“Wait till they release me.” She doesn’t say anything more out loud, but Castle very clearly hears I don’t want you to go away yet.

A nurse enters.

“Can I go home yet?” Beckett asks, barely before the nurse has cleared the door.

“Not yet,” he says, as he takes readings. “But I’ll give these to the attending,” he adds as she opens her mouth, recognising reality in the shape of Beckett’s glare, “and ask him to come in and decide. Okay?”

“Okay. How long will that take?”

“If there aren’t any emergencies, he’ll be in fairly quickly. We don’t like healthy people taking up beds here.”

Beckett subsides again. Castle grins. The nurse has summed up Beckett pretty fast.

Time passes in limited, casual conversation punctuated by vengeful comments from Beckett on the perpetrators of their case and the surrounding cast members. She’s so far planned out a solid week’s worth of interrogations, which by this stage are not-so-metaphorically including thumbscrews, the boot, the rack and quite possibly the Iron Maiden. It’s moderately disturbing. Beckett is normally quite calm and reserved, but she isn’t now. She’s also unusually passive, physically. He’s not getting any vibe from her about the arm around her – neither that she wants more of a hug nor that it’s unwelcome. Okay, so they’ve only actually – er – connected in the last few days, but she’s always reacted to his presence (frequently with threats). This lack of awareness isn’t comforting. On the other hand, she’s not pulling away, which has to be worth something.
Eventually the attending resident arrives. Castle makes a polite withdrawal, and returns when the doctor has finished.

Beckett is already scrabbling in the bags Lanie had brought for some clothes. “I can go home,” she says. Castle had guessed that.

“Okay. I’ll go get my car, and by the time I get back you’ll be all ready.”
You and I

When Castle returns, Beckett is indeed all ready, and in fact is exuding an aura implying that she was ready some two minutes after he left. He collects up her limited baggage, ignoring her comment that she could carry it and he doesn’t have to; she picks up her purse; and shortly they are in his comfortable car progressing towards her new apartment. Speech is limited to directions, but the atmosphere isn’t tense. Null, perhaps.

He parks carefully and follows her up in the elevator (at least this block has an elevator) – and is, quite unreasonably, surprised all over again by the unwelcoming emptiness of her so-called home. She drifts away from him towards the kitchen, putting on the kettle, pulling out two mugs, making coffee.

Beckett takes the coffee over to Castle, and then drifts towards the couch. She feels strangely disconnected, still: dispirited by her empty apartment, tired from her experiences and the fractured nightmares of her sleep. Castle follows: wraps an arm around her, tucks her in. It’s not unwelcome, but she’s not inclined to invite anything more. It’s all still too raw: the biting memories of the day before and the days many years before that leaving her unwilling to accept intimacy.

“Did you still want to get a table?” Castle asks.

“I guess. Tomorrow, maybe. It’s far too late now.”

She’s not really enthusiastic.

“I’ll come with you. Carry the load.”

She glances at him. That had sounded like a typical Castle subtext-laden answer. “Don’t you have to spend some time at home?”

Castle’s face tightens. “Alexis still has some hard thinking to do – oh, I forgot: she did manage to hope you felt better.”

“Thank you,” Beckett says automatically.

“She needs to fix this herself. I found out where it all came from, though.”

“Mm?” She’s not really that interested, tonight. She might have been, two days ago.

“Meredith.”

“Your ex?” Beckett blurs with a good deal more life than she had a second before. That explains a lot in one word. She almost – almost – feels some sympathy for Alexis.

“Yeah. Seems she’s been dripping poison in Alexis’s ear since the summer. Making her think I’d rather have you than her. It’s wrong. It’s not the same thing at all. She’s my daughter and that’s totally different from you. I can have both.”

He turns to her and pulls her much closer, descending towards her lips.

She jerks away. She doesn’t mean to, but she just can’t deal with anything that feels like desire right now.

“Beckett?” Castle gasps, and draws back sharply. “What’s wrong?”
She can only stare at him, white and tense. He very cautiously takes her hand, and her fingers close around his.

“I’m not… I wouldn’t…”

“I know,” she says. “It’s…” but she turns away, so he can’t see her face. She finds herself being gently turned back.

“I’m not him. Them. I won’t do anything you don’t want, and right now you don’t want anything.” She tightens her grip.

“I just want held,” she manages, and doesn’t quite lose control of her voice. Castle’s arm comes back around her shoulders, no pressure to move, no demands, and so she can tuck herself into him, knowing that he won’t push. She buries her face in his shoulder, and tries very hard not to let the tears fall.

He pats her back, very tentatively. “It’s okay. Really it is. Lean on me.” She does. “You’re allowed to be upset.” He pauses. “As long as you don’t ruin my shirt with mascara stains. It was expensive.”

It’s just what she needs. Castle being irritating is exactly what she needs, and she wonders how he knew.

“I don’t mind tears, but I do mind black smudges. I have a reputation to keep up.”

“Didn’t see you on the Best-Dressed list,” she achieves, with some effort.

“But I was on the most eligible bachelors list,” Castle says smugly. “You can’t deny that.”

“Bet you bribed them.”

“Not at all. I’m very eligible. For the right woman.”

“One who doesn’t know you yet?” Beckett snarks, recovering normality with every feed line Castle presents – and she knows he’s doing it to force the reaction, and she also knows it’s working.

“I, my dear Detective, am known to millions” –

“By reputation” –

“and everyone loves me.”

“Everyone?”

“Even you. You just don’t admit it.”

Beckett splutters indignantly. “You conceited, arrogant… lout.”

“I’m not a lout. Or an oaf, before you start on the synonyms,” Castle says happily. “I’m suave, sophisticated and debonair. And rich.”

“Does your head still fit through doorways?”

“Yep.” He smiles sweetly at her. “And now you’re all back to normal. Did I say I was highly intelligent and empathetic, too?”
Beckett splutters some more, wordless. However, she has to admit that she feels much better. Somehow he’s found the route out: snark and banter and matching wits: making her remember that there’s much more to her than a seventeen year old piece of meat.

She unfurls slightly. “How did you know?”

“How intelligent and empathetic?” She makes a face at him. “That’s not polite.”

She humphs, and then eases into his arm again. “Thanks. You were right.” Her head leans on his shoulder, and she curls an arm round his middle. Castle’s other arm closes round her: soft embrace that still doesn’t ask for more.

“There,” he says quietly. “Just stay there for a while. No need to move. No need to go anywhere. Just be easy.”

Castle is privately utterly horrified at Beckett’s reaction, and more than a little concerned. Banter and irritation seems to have cured it, but he thinks that the missing words there might be for now. Well, he is not a lout, an oaf, or an idiot, and he can deal with a substantial length of time of Beckett-cuddling without feeling deprived of anything except, perhaps, blood flow to his fingers. She needs stability and comfort, and he is very good at those.

Unfortunately, he also has to go home. He’d said to Alexis that they could talk more later, and it is now rapidly approaching later. He can’t break that promise, because it’s all fragile enough without that complication.

“I need to call Alexis,” he explains.

“Sure.” Beckett slides away and into her bedroom. It’s not clear whether that’s privacy for his call or biological necessity. He wanders to the window, which has a slightly less bleak view than Beckett’s barely furnished room.

“Rodgers residence.”

“Really, Mother? I thought this was my loft.”

“Oh! Richard. Of course it is, when I’m answering. I am Martha Rodgers and I reside here.”

Castle raises a quizzical eyebrow which is entirely wasted on his cellphone.

“Now, what do you want?”

“You to remember that it’s my loft?”

“Pish. You didn’t call for that.”

“No. Is Alexis there?”

“Yes. But she hasn’t come out of her room since you left.”

“May I speak to her, Mother?”

He can hear his mother calling to Alexis, and then the sounds of her feet climbing the stairs, her knuckles rapping on Alexis’s door, and then her voice explaining.

“Dad?”
That’s a relief. He’d thought that Alexis might not talk to him.

“Yes. I’m coming back shortly, if you want to talk some more?”

“No,” she sniffs. Tears are clearly close.

“You don’t want to talk?”

“No now. I can’t,” she wails.

“Okay, pumpkin. If you don’t want to talk, then that’s fine for now,” he says soothingly. “In that case I’ll see you tomorrow. Can you give the phone back to Grams, please?”

There are noises of transfer.

“Yes?” his mother asks.

“Alexis doesn’t want to talk to me yet. Will you keep an eye on her? She might talk to you. This has all been Meredith poisoning her.”

“You told me,” his mother replies acidly. “I’ll do what I can.”

“Thanks.”

He puts his phone away, and shortly Beckett reappears. Castle is still staring out of the window. She goes to the kettle to make more coffee, and when the slight clinking of cups and patter of coffee grounds hits his ears, he follows her there.

The first Beckett knows of his presence is a light touch on her shoulder. This time, she doesn’t flinch, or jerk away. Taking it as consent, he wraps an arm across her, and then simply waits, allowing her to decide the next steps.

The next step, it appears, is brewing coffee, and then taking it all back to the couch, again.

“I can stay,” Castle notes neutrally. “I’m not needed at home.”

Beckett slips her hand into his. “Please,” she says, and nothing more.

Some time later, Beckett is half-asleep in Castle’s loose, barely-there hold. She’s obviously not entirely over the effects of the drugs. He taps her on the cheek, and she rouses.

“Bedtime for you, Detective,” he says parentally. She growls. “Look, you’re mostly asleep already. Might as well be comfortable.” He smirks evilly. “I only ever cuddle a teddy bear in bed.”


“Yep. Soft, warm and cuddly.” He stares soulfully into her eyes. “You wouldn’t be so cruel as to deprive me of my teddy bear, would you?”

“I am not a stuffed toy.”

Castle’s eyes twinkle wickedly. “I could stuff” –

“Shut up.”

“Peppers, I was going to say. Or mushrooms. Stuffed mushrooms are delicious. You have such a
dirty mind, Beckett. It’s quite disturbing.”

“I am going to get ready for bed. Without any more discussion of stuffing anything.”

“You are no fun, you know?”

Beckett doesn’t dignify that with an answer. Instead, she stalks off to her bedroom. The effect is ruined by her gaping yawn and the slight wobble in her steps. Castle gives it a calculated several moments, in which, if she wishes, Beckett could remember that he isn’t actually leaving because she hasn’t revoked his invitation to stay…well, his comment that he could and her lack of objection, and on not being requested to take his leave, pads into the bedroom and finds Beckett already curled up among her pillows, eyes shut, face buried.

He tiptoes to her bathroom and, not now cleaning up from angry, hot sex or less angry but still rough further rounds, takes it in more fully. It is also bare. The usual products – a faint hint of cherry in the air, which comes from a bottle of body wash, joined by shampoo and conditioner – a few items of makeup, the basic minimum hygiene list for any adult of handwash, toothbrush and paste, mouthwash. The towels are less than luxurious: not harsh, but… average.

She’d had to get all the basic necessities fast, on a budget, he recalls his own conclusion, and had therefore only bought the minimum. Settled for what she could get.

He brushes his teeth with a finger (ugh) and uses the mouthwash. That done, he tiptoes back out, past the sleeping form, foetally tightly closed, and into the main room again. In the dim light through the window – there are no side lights, and – oh. He quietly shuts the bedroom door and then switches on the harsh central light. Light doesn’t improve the space. She has nothing, effectively. He notes the small pile of books on the floor, the cheap pine desk and chair under a window; and thinks of her previous apartment: eclectic, but so very Kate Beckett, exuding her personality. Her home. This is not a home, and it doesn’t really look like it’s going to be one for some considerable time.

He investigates further. The bare minimum of kitchen equipment – well, Beckett never seemed to cook before, so he guesses that she hasn’t prioritised that – coffee making accoutrements, plain white china: four of everything. A settled-for minimum, again. She couldn’t even have the whole gang around, with only that few: there are five of them.

Oh. His heart twists painfully. She’d thought that there would only be four. He, after all, hadn’t wanted her, so she had thought. So she’d used her limited funds accordingly. He could weep. Here, effectively alone in her space, the full enormity of the damage Meredith has caused is made manifest. Had Beckett but stayed, even for a month, she’d have been able to do better.

He can’t even help. Beckett won’t accept money (and he won’t insult her pride by offering), nor any major item. If he’s really lucky, she’ll let him give her something small. A cheap side table, perhaps. Maybe a small lamp. Nothing more.

He circles once more, and then returns to the bedroom, stripping to boxers and then sliding in – compared to his king-size, her bed is narrow, though she’s not occupying much of it. He remembers her reaction in the hospital, and, despite his urgent desire to tuck her against him, pull her in and guard her from the night and the nightmares, can only lay a hand delicately on her waist. That, at least, doesn’t rouse her or scare her into wakefulness.

He is shocked into full consciousness by Beckett apparently having a punch-up with the covers and her pillow. She’s shouting no, no, which is the proximate cause, and he’s simply glad that it wasn’t a blow that landed on him, because it would certainly hurt. He moves out of the way of the mess,
and then slips out of his side of the bed and round to stand by hers.

After a few moments, her eyes are yanked open: she focuses on his figure and shrieks, jerking to upright and orienting to her closet.

“It’s me,” he says. “Not a nightmare.” She slumps back. He sits down on the edge of the bed, and then, carefully, takes her into his arms.

“I woke you,” she says. “I didn’t mean to.”

“What was that about?”

She closes up.

“Beckett? Kate, talk to me.”

“It was just a dream. It’s not a problem.”

“Just like it was a dream earlier when you had exactly the same reaction? You’ve been off since you came round properly. If you talk to me, it might not be so bad.”

She shakes her head. Her face is hidden behind the gloom and the curtain of slightly longer hair. He smooths it back over her cheek, behind her ear.

“It was just a dumb dream. I’m fine.

“You are not fine if you’re waking up screaming at the sight of me and reaching for a gun that isn’t there. Just tell me about it.” His voice alters to coaxing. “C’mon. I was there. All the way. I was there for you. Just let me be there for you now.” He strokes comfortingly down her back. “I know what happened. You can’t tell me anything I don’t know.”

“You didn’t show up in time,” she whispers. “None of you were there.” She swallows. “And I remembered everything. No memory wipe from the roofie.” Her bent shoulders quiver. “Everything that could have happened.”

He clasps her more tightly, and tucks her head into the notch between his neck and shoulder. “It didn’t happen.”

“I know that. So it’s not a problem. It’s just a nightmare. It’s fine.”


“What? I’m not a bear.”

“You growl just like a bear.” He widens his eyes pathetically.

“That expression doesn’t work in the dark.”

“You couldn’t say that if you hadn’t seen it.”

“I don’t need to see you to know when you’re trying to look cute.”

“Come here, Beckett. I’ll keep the nightmares away.” He hopes. He really hopes. Because if it doesn’t, he can see where this is going, and the answer is nowhere fast, till she works it through. If
he can’t even hold her in her sleep, then whatever may happen when she’s awake will be an effort, even if she doesn’t know it.

She hesitates. He tamps down the twisting of his gut, the stab in his chest, and forces himself to wait, forces a lazy smile to his lips – and doesn’t make a single move. He can feel her doubt.

She slides down on her own side of the bed – and then turns into him: rolls over the nearer arm to tuck against his chest, allow his arm to curve around her, the other to meet it and keep her close. She’s not entirely relaxed, and he won’t sleep till she does. He’ll know it when she is: she can’t hide from him when she’s this near.

“My Beckett,” he murmurs into her hair, flicking softly against his neck. “I’ve got you.” But it still takes long minutes before her body turns lax and her breathing deep and even.

He’s woken, again, by frantic movement and the repetitive *no, no!* of her nightmare. This time, he tries smoothing over her spine, murmuring quietly in her ear in a deep, reassuring baritone. Something works: he can’t tell what, but she calms and curls back into his embrace.

It happens twice more before morning. Each time, Castle murmurs comforting nothings; each time, she quiets.

Beckett wakes, and finds herself tucked up against Castle, who was clearly deprived of a teddy bear before he was ready to lose it. It’s a nice sensation. Castle is very comfortably muscular and warm. On the debit side, however, she’d had nightmares on and off all night, and despite Castle’s impressive physique, she can’t muster a single iota of lust. Worse, each time she remembers *them*, it’s overshadowed by the sleazy words and actions of the photographer and dresser. Worse still, Castle is very obviously not suffering the same lack of interest, and she has no idea where to start to explain. Even the thought of explaining leaves her scarlet-faced and trying to hide.

Hiding, it seems, is not allowed. She finds herself rolled over: Castle propped up on an elbow and those too-penetrating blue eyes examining her.

“You had a lot of nightmares,” he opens. “Same again?” She nods. “Mm. I know what you need,” he says, happily predatory. Beckett’s heart fractures. Surely not? She would never, ever have believed it. “You need to interrogate the hell out of those two assholes, and then you need to go and ruin that dresser’s life.”

Her mouth falls open.

“So we’d better get some coffee and some breakfast on the way to the Twelfth, because you need to fuel the righteous fire,” he adds.

“Righteous fire?”

“Yep. Righteous fire. I’m thinking of trying out for the MidWest preaching circuit in my spare time. Think I’ll get there?”

“With your reputation?”

“I could have reformed,” he says wickedly. “You know the shepherd rejoices more over finding the sheep that was lost than those that didn’t stray. Now, up you get, Detective. You’ve got a busy day.”

He shoves her out of her own bed while she’s still flabbering her gast. “Shower. I’ll make the first cup of coffee and then it’s my turn. Hurry up.” She stalls. “What’s wrong?” he asks, in a very
different voice.

“Will you be there?” she asks in a small, tight voice.

“There? You think I’d miss this? Badass Beckett burying the bad guys?” He smirks. “Besides which, you’re still tall. You’ll tower over them, and you know how much I like that.”

She moves off to her shower, as Castle makes the coffee and thinks very quietly to himself that Beckett needs her work to restore her self-confidence.
Beckett strides into the bullpen with her workaday persona full on. Nightmares and worries have no place here, unless it’s she inciting them in others.

“Beckett?” Ryan notices her first. “You better already?”


“Couldn’t let you have all the fun of interrogation,” she points out. “What do we got?”

“The recording from your wire, the tapes from the photoshoot” – she winces – “don’t worry, none of us went near them: Shaw has them locked down; and then our other evidence: the analysis of what they doped you with from the wine glass, our statements of what went down in the warehouse, but we’re still trying to nail down that Sevenelms guy’s background and history. He’s not American. On the other hand” – Ryan produces an unusually feral baring of teeth – “Carter Connor is dead meat. We’ve matched him to the San Francisco and French cases – SFPD are O’Leary’s new best friends, even if he did call ‘em foreign; and the French are talking to Avery – did you know he spoke French?”

“No,” says Beckett with some surprise.

“So our good friend Connor is going down for life, if California don’t call dibs and give him the needle instead.”

“Mm,” Beckett says thoughtfully. “Life in Rikers as a rapist and murderer – of youngish women, which I’m sure nobody would deliberately let out… or Death Row in California, which would be drawn out too. Mmmm. Let me think about that.” Her expression is as vicious as Ryan’s. “Okay. Get me up to speed.”

Ryan and O’Leary start talking. Esposito is conspicuous by the amount of not-talking and downright hanging back he’s doing. Beckett doesn’t have time or inclination to deal with it, though, and truth to tell she is still pretty pissed with him and is quite content that the other two are taking point. If an outsider – such as Montgomery, poking his head out of his office to see what’s going on – were to look at the group, he might think that O’Leary and Ryan were a barrier between Castle and Beckett on the one side, and Esposito on the other.

Forty minutes later Beckett has extracted every ounce of information from the team, and has braved the BatCave to beard Shaw and Avery in their den. Twenty minutes later, she returns, with a very satisfied expression.

“Right,” she says ferociously. “Let’s go make Connor’s day hell.” She picks up her pen and pad with her notes, and is halfway across the floor before Castle has blinked and begun to follow her.

Connor does not appear to have appreciated the sting operation. It also appears that he must have tripped and fallen while in Holding, or possibly there is no honour among thieves, so to speak. She’ll get that story later.


“You lying bitch!”
Beckett simply looks utterly bored.

“T’ve never been convicted of anything. I haven’t done anything wrong. You entrapped me and my lawyer will make sure the jury knows it. I’ll be free.”

Beckett holds his gaze. “You’ve done plenty wrong, and I didn’t entrap you. You chose to spike my wine, and you chose to try to inject me with heroin. It’s all on tape.”

“You won’t have a minute’s credibility when my shots get into evidence.”

“Really? Because I’ve got lots of discussions with the FBI in which it’s clear that I only took the role to give you enough rope to hang yourself. And Selwyn knew all about it, too.”

That rocks him.

“No way you haven’t modelled before. There’ll be something out there. Dirty shots or a movie.”

“I’ll save you the trouble of looking,” Beckett bites back. “Age seventeen – just after I graduated high school, so just before I went to university, or joined the police academy – I did a summer’s modelling with Parfaitil. You’re not going to get far with that. Thirteen years ago, to help pay my college fees? You’ll be laughed out of court and into Rikers.”

Castle is impressed. Beckett hasn’t turned a hair about the idea that those ghastly photos would be used in evidence. She’s thrown it right back in his face. Connor has seriously underestimated his mark here, and it’s about to bite him on the ass.

“Of course, it’ll only be Rikers if the San Francisco PD don’t claim precedence. They’re aiming for Death Row for you, and if they want you we’ll happily wave you bye-bye, baby. The needle’s much cheaper than putting you in Rikers, and it’s California’s budget too. Win-win, from where I’m standing.”

Connor’s colour drains.

“The only way you might get out of that is if you give us everything on the other guy.”

“I don’t know anything.”

“Liar,” Beckett says. “I’ve heard the tape when you dragged me into that warehouse so you could strip and rape me with your pal. You know lots about him. You’ve been working together for years.” She shrugs. “Still, have it your own way. You’re going down. Not my problem.” She stands up, and leaves, ignoring his incoherent noises. Castle follows her.

“That was short,” he says.

“He’s got no chance. I just want him to roll on the other guy. We could use a bit more on him.” She leads the way into Observation. “Now we’ll let him sweat. He’s going to be really unhappy for the next while. He didn’t expect that he’s up for the death penalty.”

Castle slides up to her, and loosely wraps her into the crook of his arm. “It was fun to watch, too. He’s not very happy, is he?”

“Nope,” she replies, popping the P with a plosive snap of satisfaction. “The less happy he is, the happier I am.”

“Told you it was what you needed,” he says very smugly. She elbows him, relatively gently, and
humphs. “What about Sevenelms?”

“I want Connor to roll on him. Then we’ll get him. And first thing tomorrow we’ll go and make Selwyn’s life miserable.” She suddenly stops. “Shaw did get the camera and those photos, didn’t she?”

“I don’t know,” Castle admits. “It wasn’t exactly my top priority on Friday.”

“We need to ask her. I don’t want those floating around. Last thing I need. I want to make sure they’re destroyed.”

Castle nods, emphatically. He never, ever wants to see them. However good they are, he never wants to be reminded of that day. “Do you want to see them first?”

Beckett opens her mouth, then closes it again without a sound. That hadn’t occurred to her. Does she want to see them? Her instinctive reaction had been hell no! However… if she doesn’t, would the unknown haunt her? Would she always wonder how bad they were? She shudders. Castle tucks her a little closer, still not tightly, and doesn’t speak.

She stares through the glass at the revolting, pathetic figure of Connor, twisting his hands as if he’s the upset one here. He made his own bad choices: she only had to do her job, no matter how much she disliked it. It’s left her with a full day in hospital, an overdose and a feeling of being dirtied and smirched; and most worryingly, a set of nightmares. But. But sending him down for life will solve that one. Oh yes. She’ll be right there to see it.

But still she shivers again. She looks up at Castle, who is very carefully not touching her in any meaningful way at all, but who very clearly wants to hug her close and cosset her and make the memories and nightmares go away.

She steps inward, and leans against him. “I need to see them.” She trembles. “I have to know.” Castle swallows. “Alone.” He sighs with untold relief. “Let’s go.” She breathes in, hard and raw. “No time like the present. Connor needs time to sweat.”

Shaw looks up with some surprise when Beckett clacks into the BatCave, where there is already substantially less equipment than there had been. “Detective?” she asks.

“Did you take the camera and photos into evidence?”

Shaw and Avery exchange glances. “We took the photos he had at the scene,” she says. “We picked up his camera from the agency but didn’t need the shots from there.”

Beckett pales. “You mean they’re still at Stardance?”

“No, they’re in the evidence room, still on the camera, we just didn’t need them printed. We’ve got them.”

“Okay. I wanna see the photos.”

Shaw regards her very carefully. “Avery, Mr Castle, out.” Avery whips up and out, and Castle’s feet follow without any input from his brain at all. The command note has gone straight to his reflexes.

“Why’d you send them out?”

“Why do you want to see the photos?” Shaw flicks straight back.
“So I know the worst,” Beckett bites out bleakly. “Otherwise I’ll – they’ll eat at me.”

“Okay. I’ll get them for you. You can look at them in here. I’ll make sure no-one disturbs you.” There’s an odd note in Shaw’s voice. “Don’t you want Mr Castle with you?”

“No.”

“What did you do to Connor?”

“Told him SFPD want him for the needle, and let him sweat. I’ll go back when I’ve seen these shots.”

“Is that really the best idea?”

“Yes.” It’s chopped off. Shaw desists, and retires to find the relevant photos; returning briskly to give them to Beckett. Well. To give her both the prints and the camera, and point out how to find the relevant shots, which Beckett would have been perfectly capable of doing by herself.

“Let me know when you’re done,” she says, and leaves.

Beckett looks at the camera, and at her trembling hands; lets loose a curse that she’d once heard Espo use, and begins.

Twenty minutes later, she leaves the conference room and goes straight to the restroom, where she loses the entire contents of her stomach. She sits on the floor, heedless of her dark dress pants. The photos had been utterly brilliant – and wholly degrading. She’d looked like she was straight out of Hustler. Worse, she’d looked like she was both aroused and enjoying it. She throws up again, thin bile, and slumps. It takes more minutes before she can stand, leave the stall and rinse her mouth, dust her pants, cool her forehead against the tiles and finally straighten and meet her own eyes: dark and dispassionate, hiding her thoughts and feelings.

She strides out. “Agent Shaw, I’m done. Castle, with me. We’re going to finish off that weasel.” But she doesn’t look at him as she passes him and speaks. She doesn’t look at anyone at all. She’s as rigidly controlled as the first day they ever met.

Connor is an unpleasant shade of green-white: as if he’s about to vomit, or has.

“Contemplating the needle?” Beckett snaps before she’s fully through the door. “I’ll be watching. I’ll enjoy it as much as you enjoyed taking those photos and thinking about rape and murder.”

Castle knots his fingers beneath the table. He’s never heard that sneering, taunting tone from Beckett before. He thinks she’s acting. He hopes she’s acting. The air of the room is cold, heavy, claustrophobic.

“You can bring the photos into evidence if you like. I’ve seen them. They’re nothing special.” She’s contemptuous. “Any two-bit tit photographer could manage that.”

“You lying bitch!” he howls. “Those photos take talent. No-one else could have done it. No-one could have turned those whores into great art. They didn’t deserve to be made famous.”

“Whores?” Beckett says coldly.

“Yeah. Worthless trash. I made them gorgeous. They owed me everything.”

“So you played them. Took them out and drugged them for your pal.”
“He deserved them.”

“Why? You’re the one who’s going to die while he walks free. Of course, he didn’t do anything. It was all you. You’re the one who roofied the girls. You’re the one who injected them with heroin, raped them, killed them and beat them up after to try to hide the evidence. He didn’t do a thing. I only wish you could die once for every one of them.” She bares her teeth. “It’ll feel as if you do, though. Did you know that? They make believe you won’t feel a thing. You will. You’ll scream with the pain. You’ll void your bowels and bladder and then lie in your own piss and shit screaming and humiliated like you did to them. And I’ll watch. Every. Single. Second. For all of them.”

Castle’s fingers are so tightly twisted they hurt. She’s using words like a scalpel, flaying Connor to the bone without a touch, Nemesis with a gun and shield.

He is terrified.

This is not his Beckett. This is Justice, blind to human frailty, blind to anything except cold, cold results. He doesn’t know this person at all.

“You’re going to die screaming, down in California,” she whispers, and she smiles horribly. “And I’m going to watch.”

And he breaks.

“He paid me,” he cries. “He beat them and I took photos and then he injected them and I photographed it all for him and I never killed any of them I just took photos.”

“Where are the photos?”

“Box at my place. Safe. Hidden behind my closet.”

“Combination?”

“Six, four, three, five, six, two.”

“Where’s the money?”

“He wired it. Into my account. Came from England. He’s from England.”

“What’s his real name?”

“Sevenelms. He’s this big businessman from England and he paid me for beautiful girls.”

There is a pause.

“I told you everything. I want a deal.”

Beckett’s face is at absolute zero. “There are no deals. You helped him. If they want you, they’ll have you.”

“Nooooo!” he screams. “You promised.”

“I promised you nothing.” She stands. “Rikers or the needle. Either way, you’ll suffer.”

She walks out, as cold as the ice of the Antarctic, leaving Connor begging behind her.
Castle follows, slowly, appalled and awed in equal measure. He finds that his own hands are
shaking. He’s never seen anything like it and he never, ever, wants to again. He can still hear
Connor through the shut door: reduced to grovelling terror and shreds, pleading for his life and
mercy.

There is no mercy. There is only Beckett, and blind Justice.

Beckett has disappeared. Castle looks around, and sees only Shaw and Avery, exiting Observation.

“That was scary,” Avery says. “Does she do that often?” Castle shakes his head.

“She played it perfectly,” Shaw adds.

“Are you sure she was playing?” Castle asks. “It didn’t feel like she was playing in there.”

“Mm,” is all Shaw says. Castle returns to his usual chair, and Shaw disappears back into the
conference room.

In the restroom, Beckett is losing everything from her already-emptied stomach down to its lining:
a painful, unproductive retching that burns her throat and rips at her abdominal muscles. She’s not
throwing up at the memory of what she has just said.

She’s throwing up because she meant every last word of it.

She’s never been unable to detach, before. She’s always maintained a distance, kept herself apart.
This time, she can’t. It’s all too real: it could have been her if the team, the boys, Castle hadn’t
been right on her tail. If the locator hadn’t worked… if they’d hit traffic… Death is a matter of very
small margins.

She retches again, painfully, and sits on the floor for the second time that day, because she can’t
summon energy to raise herself up. The undercover op, and the photos; the interrogation, and the
results – none of it is who she thought she was.

None of it is who she is.

And yet it all looks and feels so convincingly real: and could she be that person? Is she that
person?

She won’t be that person. She won’t.

She cleans up, again; dusts herself off, again; and walks out into the bullpen, to all appearances her
ordinary self. Castle is sitting in his usual chair, fidgeting and playing with his phone just like
always; O’Leary is talking to Ryan and Esposito; Shaw and Avery are tidying themselves up in the
conference room. It’s all very comfortingly normal.

Castle’s expression when he catches sight of her is not normal, nor is it comforting. He looks
worried, and somehow frightened, and his smile is uncertain. She’s about to sit down when Shaw
annexes her in a swift cut-out and conveys her to the agents’ conference room. A rapid jerk of her
head removes Avery, who does a half-decent job of pretending that he needs to talk to Ryan about
camera footage.

“Yes?” Beckett queries. “I’m done with Connor.”

“Yes, you are,” Shaw agrees, slowly. “That was a pretty impressive performance in there.”
“We do what it takes.”

“Yes. And sometimes it takes more than you think.”

“Meaning?”

“I saw it all. You’re pretty close to the edge.”

“Are you telling me I’m not fit to do my job?”

“No. I’m telling you to put it down tonight and step back. You’re emotionally involved. I don’t know, but I guess you spent the last quarter-hour in the restroom, because you look like hell, Detective Beckett.”

“I’m fine. I’m going to put this slimeball where he belongs – jail. What happens to him there isn’t my call. Then I’m going to put his pal in there with him.”

“Mm,” Shaw emits sceptically. “There’s no point telling you that you should take the evening off, is there?”

“Not till we’ve run down Sevenelms and made sure he can’t walk.”

“Are you going to interrogate him today?”

“Only if we’ve enough to tie him up in knots. Connor’s statements aren’t enough on their own. We need to find those other photos and trace the money.”

“Avery’s tracking the money, because it’s wired internationally, and we’ll get faster answers than you will. No-one’s gone out to Connor’s place to search it yet.”

“Sounds like a job for Ryan and Esposito, while I’m putting the story together.”

Shaw nods.

“I’m sure Mr Castle will help you find the story,” she says dryly. “That’s what he’s good at.”

“Yep: stories and wild theories,” Beckett says very blandly.

“I’d let him take care of you, too.”

Beckett raises a groomed eyebrow.

“Look, Detective, any idiot could spot that he’s devoted to you, not to mention that you’ve got together in the last few days. I don’t need to be a profiler to see that. But even if you hadn’t, he’s pretty close to the emotional edge too, and he’s the sort of man who needs to take care of the people he” – Shaw plainly picks her next word – “cares about. So let him. Even if it’s just getting your lunch.”

Beckett’s raised eyebrow does not lower. “Thanks for the advice. Let’s get on with the case.”
“Ryan, Espo?”

“Yo, Beckett?”

“We need to search Connor’s place. He says he took photos of Sevenelms beating up the victims. According to him, they’re in a hidden safe in the back of his closet.” She hands over the combination. “Can you go rip his apartment to shreds? Take CSU with you. They might find some other useful stuff. Evidence of Sevenelms being there would be good.”

Ryan and Esposito look at each other, just a little uncomfortably. Beckett flicks her gaze from one to the other. “You got a problem?” she says. “If so, solve it.” They decamp, very hastily.

“O’Leary,” she says, “got a minute? Let’s see what we got on Sevenelms so far.”

“We don’t have DNA,” the Titan rumbles. “We’re holding him on the basis of the tape from the warehouse and the situation we caught him red-handed in.”

“Connor says Sevenelms paid him. Avery’s tracing the cash. CSU are going with Ryan and Espo to see what they can pick up from Connor’s apartment. What else is there?”

“Still waiting for anythin’ useful from Paris and San Francisco. They ain’t got much. My case is part of yours, so if we wrap yours up, that’s mine done too.”

“How long’s DNA going to take?”

“’Nother day, minimum.” There is a noise, as of small avalanches, from his stomach. O’Leary’s prairie sized cheeks turn a pretty shade of pink. “Guess that means it’s lunchtime,” he says. “C’mon. Let’s all three of us get some food.”

Beckett doesn’t really want food: her stomach roils and cramps at the thought. But O’Leary’s gaze is just a little too sharply enquiring for her to make an excuse.

“Okay.” She turns. “Castle, you want some lunch?”

The three of them wander out. Well, O’Leary wanders. The other two are forced to a brisk pace. “Let’s go to that fancy burger place of yours,” he rumbles. The other two look confusedly at each other. Fancy burger place?

“Where we went the other day?” he says, spotting their lack of comprehension.

“Remy’s?” Beckett realises. “Fancy?”

“’Tain’t McDonalds. Fancy. We got time. Ryan ‘n’ Esposito won’t be back for a coupla hours, an’ we ain’t got DNA before tomorrow. An’ I’m hungry.”

“Works for me,” Castle says happily. “I’m hungry too.”

Beckett sighs, just like usual. “Okay. We’ll all go to Remy’s.”

The booth is a little over-full with O’Leary in it. Beckett is tucked in between Castle and the wall, with O’Leary’s mass occupying the whole of the other side of the booth. Castle is quite happy with this arrangement, since – and because it’s O’Leary, also known as Cupid – it enables him to stay...
firmly in contact with Beckett.

He is quite seriously worried about the way she’d behaved earlier. In fact, he’s quite seriously worried about all of her behaviour since she’d finished the undercover op on Friday evening. She doesn’t mind being hugged, but anything more spooks her. She’d been cruelly terrifying to Connor, and while he deserves it, Castle isn’t at all sure that she’d been acting.

When she orders, he’s more worried. She has soda, not a milkshake, and the smallest, plainest possible burger and fries. She eats a lot less than half of it, too, very slowly. He suspects that had O’Leary not suggested lunch, she wouldn’t have bothered. Most of it is scattered around the plate, picked apart and dropped. Neither man comments, though they both notice, and know the other notices too.

Too soon, Beckett’s jonesing to get back to the case and has hustled everyone into finishing and leaving, though O’Leary’s dark mutterings about the lack of opportunity for dessert means that leaving is delayed till he can get brownies to go. Castle sulks all the way back to the Twelfth because he hadn’t thought of that and O’Leary refuses to share. Beckett sighs all the way back to the Twelfth, which changes nothing at all about Castle’s pout and O’Leary’s enormous grin. It’s almost what she would have done on Thursday. It almost sounds real.

On the way back, it’s Beckett whose fast steps leave the others struggling to keep up. When she finds that the boys aren’t back, she’s less than happy, scrabbling all the other, insufficient, evidence together, drawing the spaces in their case on her murder board. The largest gap is still the evidence against Sevenelms. She glares at the board till it should shrivel and burn, and all the time her fingers knot and twitch, as fidgety as Castle has ever been. He doesn’t dare open the conversation he wants to have: not in the bullpen, not in the precinct. Not in public at all.

Fortunately, before Beckett’s restless fingers actually cause a friction-lit fire, Ryan and Espo reappear, stony-faced.

“Surprised she sent us out,” Esposito says.

“Yeah? Gimme a minute to get CSU to meet us there.” Ryan makes a quick call, and achieves success. “Okay. Why?”

Espo squirms uncomfortably, and there is a considerable and unpleasant silence. “She threw me out. Wouldn’t listen. Don’t think she’s cool with me.”

Ryan thinks that might be a considerable understatement. Then again, Beckett isn’t exactly in her usual headspace, so it could be anything.

“Didn’t give me a chance to say anything.” Ryan makes a vaguely sympathetic noise. “She ain’t cool with anythin’ I’ve done. All I did was have her back, an’ she chops me off at the knees.”

Ryan thinks for a bit, as he negotiates the traffic to Connor’s New Jersey apartment, in a very smart area. He might have claimed to be a top-class photographer, but if Ryan’s any judge, he couldn’t have afforded this without some serious extra-curricular earnings. It’s pretty clear where those came from, now.

“Maybe she doesn’t see it like you do. You thought letting Castle see her mom’s file would help, but you know how she felt about it – hell, Espo, you were there before me, you know the story. Why’d you do it?”

“Cause he seemed like a good guy. Then.”
“So why not now?”

“He went diggin’ an’ upset Beckett.”

Ryan emits a disgusted noise. “An’ what’d you expect when you let him loose? Huh? You know he sticks his nose in everything. You telling me you didn’t think he’d take it on? Sure you did.” He stops hard. “Oh,” he says. “I get it. You thought he’d fix it. An’ when he couldn’t ‘cause Beckett threw him out without listenin’ you blamed him. An’ when he did like she asked and kept his nose out after it you blamed him for that.”

Espo doesn’t say a word. Ryan goes on.

“An’ then you blamed him for not dating her when she wouldn’t even speak to him all summer an’ walked out his loft. We’d’ve arrested him for layin’ a finger on her if he had dated her – or tried, when she didn’t want it. You set him up for trouble an’ then blamed him when he got it. Way to go, dumbass.”

More glowering silence fills the cruiser.

“The only way you’re gonna fix this mess is if you explain an’ apologise. No-one else is going to be able to do it for you.”

There is complete and hostile silence until they pull up at Connor’s apartment, after that comment.

CSU arrive right behind the detectives, and the apartment is taken apart. There are indeed photos, the subject matter of which is quite sufficient to shock Ryan and Esposito into horrified camaraderie again.

“That’s freakin’ horrible, bro!”

Ryan nods. The photographs are sickening. They are also very clearly of Sevenelms. In fact, they are so clear that it’s a dead cert that they were blackmail material, should it ever be required. Without further ado, the two cops convey them back to the precinct as fast as they can. There is no conversation on the way back that isn’t expressions of disgust at the new evidence.

“What have you got?” Beckett asks immediately.

“The photos,” they say together. “It’s – you don’t wanna see them.”

“I’m a cop. Show me.” There’s no room for argument in her tone. This is her case and these photos are a key piece of evidence.

Shaw and Avery appear on her words. Esposito spreads the photos out on Beckett’s desk and everyone looks at them. There is stunned silence from everyone, for a moment.


“Very nice,” Shaw says coldly. “All we need now is the money trail and the DNA. We’re not going to get them on a Sunday night. Time for everyone to take a break and start fresh tomorrow.”

Three detectives aim for their desks. Beckett does not. “I’m going to see Stardance tomorrow,” she says. It’s not a request for permission. “Their dresser is going to find out that feeling up the models is a very bad idea.” She doesn’t wait for a response.
“Time to go home, Beckett,” Castle says, from her desk as she approaches. He hadn’t gone near
the photos. He couldn’t stand the thought, never mind reality.

She consults her watch. “I’ve missed all the flea markets. A table will need to wait another week.”

Considering her day, that’s a non-sequitur of stunning proportions.

“Floors work just as well, and you can’t knock things off them.”

“Only over,” she says, with half-hearted pedantry. She isn’t obviously packing up.

“C’mon. Home time. You need to get some rest before you gut the dresser.”

She unenthusiastically pulls herself together. There’s not much spark left, and her eyes are tired and
dull. As soon as she’s unable to eviscerate one of her suspects, everything has stopped.

Castle doesn’t touch her in the elevator, and doesn’t touch her as they leave. Instead, he plonks
himself down in the passenger seat of her car, and waits for her to notice.

“Want a ride home?” she says.

No, he does not. “I thought you might want some company with your takeout.”

She shrugs. Castle waits. “Don’t you need to go home?”

He doesn’t, having used part of the waiting time until Ryan and Esposito arrived to have a private
discussion with his mother and Alexis. Alexis is still not ready to apologise, but although she can’t
do that, she had been amenable to his staying the evening with Beckett. She’s definitely coming
round to sense again.

“Not yet,” he temporises. “Do you want Thai? Sushi?”

“Mexican,” Beckett says. She doesn’t say comforting carbs. Strangely, Castle hears it.

“Okay. Anything you don’t like?”

“Nope. You choose. I’ve got some beer at home, if you want.”

“Sounds good,” he says, and hopes that a little alcohol will ease the strain around her; give him the
chance to make sure that she’s okay. It’s been a high stress day, and he still doesn’t know whether
she was acting or not with Connor. It hadn’t sounded like it. He maintains a demeanour of amiable
warmth – and no sexuality at all – all the way to her apartment, all the way up, and all the way
until dinner has arrived and been eaten – Beckett doesn’t want much, and most of hers ends up in
the fridge for, he assumes, tomorrow. She sips at her beer, until he finishes and tidily puts his plate
away by the sink.

“Shall I wash up, and you dry?” he suggests.

“Just leave it. I’ll get there later.”

He would protest, but he’s not willing to start a petty fight when there’s likely a bigger one waiting
in the wings. He returns to the couch, and drops a comforting arm around her shoulders, implying
without quite encouraging that she should snuggle into his broad frame and be easy with him.

She moves closer, which is both delightful and astonishing, but she’s still neutral, as she had been
last night. He finds the lack of connection worrying, but he gets it. He hates it, but he gets it.
Now he has to spoil it all.

“Earlier, when you were interrogating Connor, um… it was pretty convincing.”

“Mhm?”

“It really sounded like you meant it.”

“I did,” she says flatly. He gapes. “I meant every single fucking word of it and I hate that I did. I don’t get involved. I take them down. After that they’re not my problem. But I meant every word and I want to see that sleazy bastard dead.” She turns away from him. “His photos made me look like I was enjoying it.” The words are spat out. “I want them burned.” Her voice drops. “I want him to burn.”

She wraps arms round her knees: tight-knotted into herself.

“I think he knows that.” Castle is very sure that Connor knows that.

“They were degrading,” she says bitterly. “They were horrible.” Pause. “They were brilliant and nobody will believe that I hated it when they see them.”

“I will. Shaw will. The team” –

“They’re never going to see them.” She shudders. “I thought I could do it. Not be freaked out by it.”

“You did do it. You brought them down. You. You did it.” He shakes her very gently, and turns her to him. “They’re never going to see daylight again, because of you.” He hugs her. “You did it, Beckett. Put the job ahead of your feelings and did it. Why shouldn’t you want to see him dead? He wanted you – they wanted you – dead, and at one point they damn near did it. It’s okay.”

“It’s not okay. It’s not okay to let your feelings into it like that.”

“The only people who know that it was real are you and me.”

“And Shaw.”

“She suspects. She doesn’t know.”

Beckett is not obviously reassured, but she’s not curling into herself again.

“Anyway, it’s done now. You can take the dresser apart in the morning, Sevenelms in the afternoon, and forget about it over a nice dinner and wine in the evening.” He pats her shoulder. “Now, how about I make coffee and we drink it and don’t think about it any more till tomorrow?”

“I’ll make it.”

“Okay.”

Beckett slips away to the kitchen and shortly coffee appears. It doesn’t seem to make her happier or more relaxed, but she acquiesces to further featherlight hugging, and sips her drink quietly. She appears to be thinking. Castle leaves her to it, for now. He’s avoided disaster so far, and if that can continue he’ll be only too happy.

“I thought it was all behind me,” she says out of nowhere.
“What was?”

“That scene. Leching sleazebags feeling you up and trying to get you into bed. Casting couch fucks, promising the next shoot. Selling sex and perving over teenagers.” She swallows. “I thought I’d forgotten seeing it all. I missed most of it. I didn’t want to be in that game anyway but it paid some of my college fees, so I could just walk away and not do it because I didn’t need the next job.” A harsh breath, another gulping swallow. “And now that bastard’s made me look like a pinup centrefold. Like I would do it, do that. And they touched me and I couldn’t do anything about it because we had to take them down.”

Castle inadvertently tightens his grip around her.

“It’s not how it should be and it’s tainted everything,” she says, and bursts into tears. Through the misery she mumbles, “I can’t even…” and trails off. She doesn’t need to finish the sentence, because Castle can. *I can’t even stand being kissed by you right now.*

“Hey, hey,” he says, and tucks her head into his shoulder where she can’t possibly think that he could or would kiss her; leans his own cheek on her hair, and simply holds her close and cosseted. “It’s okay.” He stops. “Hey, that rhymes.” He refocuses. “You had to do something you really hated, that you hated back then and thought you’d never have to do again, that goes against everything you are, you put yourself in the way of being drugged and raped and even though you knew we’d be there to get you out it ended up in hospital, and now you’re wondering why you want to kill them and you can’t deal with anything…um…” He can’t find a word. “I’m not surprised at all. Of course you don’t feel like it. All you need right now is just to stand down and be easy. Nothing else.” He pats, and stays where he is.

There is a space of quietness.

“Something different,” he eventually says.

“Mhm?”

“Alexis is sorry. I’ve told her she has to apologise to you face to face, but she isn’t quite there yet. I think she will be. I know you don’t want to come to the loft right now, but… um… maybe soon?”

“Maybe,” she says, non-committally. It’s not no.

Some time later Castle realises that he has to leave, and does, with a warm hug and a dropped peck on the top of Beckett’s dark head.

“Call me any time you wanna talk,” he says. “I’ll be at the precinct in the morning. Can’t deprive you of coffee and bear claw, or you’ll try to work my machine and burn your fingers.”

“Would not,” she snips. “I can work it just fine.”

He grins evilly. “You can so not. You avoid it every time.”

“Nope. I just like you making my coffee. It’s the natural order of things.”

Castle mutters darkly at the top of her head. He pulls her tighter, just for an instant, and lets go. “My curfew,” he says. “Till tomorrow.”

“Night.”
Beckett takes another hot-to-the-point-of-scalding shower, and feels better. Castle’s completely undemanding behaviour and total understanding is not so much comforting as totally reassuring. Not that she’d ever doubted the undemanding part: but the understanding of a quintessentially Beckett point of view was helpful. It makes her feel that she wasn’t totally off the wall, if someone else – a non-cop, to boot – understands. The hot water restores her, too: steaming the taint of her day from her skin and hair, washing away her make-up, her persona, and leaving just Kate.

She nestles into her pillows, misses again her previous plump, high-quality ones; and tries to come to terms with the day and her behaviour. About the only reassurance from her conduct is that it had upset her to the point of vomiting. Gradually, she manages to unpick it all to her own satisfactory understanding, which differs not at all from Castle’s instant summary. That only leaves her the problem of how to fix her current absolute lack of any desire at all for him.

Of course, that’s almost certainly a direct result of being overdosed and molested. It’s not exactly surprising. However, she’s more worried that using the memories of being with Castle to make it through the photoshoot is what’s wrong. She ponders that, fretfully – and then remembers that she’d told him that’s what she’d done, and he had grabbed her and plastered frantic, desperate kisses on her hair as she’d shuddered and silently wept into his chest: he hadn’t blamed or shamed her, as she hadn’t blamed or shamed him for his reactions to the shoot.

She curls down, and seeks sleep. Tonight, she finds rather fewer nightmares, though she wakes terrified and frozen more than once, searching for the lingering traces of aroma-of-Castle on the pillow to remind her that there’s something better.

Someone better.
These foreign chappies

Castle, coffee and bear claw arrive on Monday morning, and are dealt with in various appropriate ways – greeted, drunk and eaten respectively – until Beckett can relieve her frustration on the Stardance dresser. She’s not going to warn Selwyn, either. DNA and money trails are still not finished, and she doesn’t need to call him when she can’t achieve anything else. Come half-past nine, when O’Leary’s threatened to turn her upside down and dangle her out a window by her ankles if she asks him about DNA again, Esposito is actively hiding from her and Ryan is merely neatening up the loose ends and pestering CSU, who sound very likely to threaten him with the same window-dangling as promised to Beckett, she summons Castle and they leave.

It’s the same receptionist as when Beckett had come in on Friday to model. She looks boredly at Beckett.

“You here again? Don’t remember you being booked today. We don’t do speculative show-ups.”

Beckett smiles with a stiletto edge. “Glad you remember me,” she says. “Detective Kate Beckett, NYPD. Get Selwyn down here.”

“Huh?” the receptionist emits, wide eyed.

“Selwyn. Now.”

She squeaks and calls him. “Mr Selwyn, there’s a Detective Beckett for you.” Pause. “Okay.” She looks at Beckett. “You’re a cop? But you were modelling. Why’d you wanna be a cop if you could be a model?”

“Better pay and conditions,” Beckett says flippantly, though there is an underlying edge. “And I get to take the shots.”

That clearly doesn’t compute with the receptionist, though Castle snickers. “But you could have been famous. Like Naomi Campbell or Kate Moss.”

Fortunately Selwyn arrives, not quite at a dead run but giving out the impression that he might have been running.

“Detective Beckett?” he says. “Come this way.” Beckett exchanges a quick glance with Castle reflecting considerable satisfaction that Selwyn is completely intimidated – and that he doesn’t want to have this conversation in public. He’ll want that even less in another moment. She smiles coldly, and they follow.

“I co-operated,” Selwyn says plaintively. “What do you want now?”

“Who was the dresser on Friday?”

“Terry? Terry Caulston. Why?”

“Use him a lot, do you?”

“About a third of the shoots. Jose’s my main man.”

“Mm,” Beckett hums judicially. Castle lurks in a corner and stays quiet.

“Why?”
Beckett switches tack. “When I first interviewed you, you implied that you ran a clean agency. No trouble on lingerie shoots, you said. You gave me the impression you didn’t let your guys get close.”

Selwyn’s colour starts to drain. “I don’t. They’re all told. They all know not to.”

“Caulston didn’t get the memo,” Beckett says, with an underlying edge of viciousness. “Never mind that we arrested Carter Connor on Friday for serial rape and murder” – he goes dead white – “it seems like you don’t have any sort of grip on what your staff are doing. Where’s Caulston?”

“Um… he’s due in to dress a shoot for Sunsandseas – holidays.”

“When?”

Selwyn frantically consults his watch. “Fifteen minutes,” he stutters.

“Right. Better get Jose in, then. Caulston isn’t going to be available.” Selwyn simply gapes at her. “And make sure the receptionist doesn’t mention us.”

“But… but…..”

“Caulston assaulted a police detective in the execution of her duties,” Castle puts in helpfully from the corner. “Not very smart.”

“But… But the shoot!”

“You’ll find another dresser.”

Selwyn whimpers, no doubt seeing income flowing out the door.

“We’ll wait. You can find us a nice private room. Bring Caulston in as soon as he arrives. Don’t tell him anything, or you’ll be joining him in a cell charged with obstruction of justice.”

Selwyn is satisfyingly terrified. He practically staggers out: Beckett having comprehensively cut the ground from under his feet. His lilywhite reputation is endangered, and both his photographer and one of his dressers are in deep, deep trouble. The door shuts very quietly behind him.

“He’d better not be long,” Castle murmurs. “If he’s late you’ll only have to glare and he’ll faint.”

She bares her teeth. “He’s going to get a really nasty surprise, isn’t he?”

“Oh, yes,” Castle hisses. “Oh, yes.”

“Can you stand out of view of the door? I only want him to see me. He won’t notice the shield and gun at first. He’ll think I’m the woman I pretended to be – meek and mild: needing to please.” Her lips snap together, thin-pinched.

“He’s going to be wrong,” Castle states flatly, and smiles as thinly-lipped as she. “But come here, before he arrives.” She quirks an eyebrow, but complies. He slides careful arms around her, not asking how she slept – that’s for later, when she’s torn each of these slimeballs apart, and need not be borne on acid, chilling fury – but simply firm reassurance that he’s there, support for her judicial vengeance.

It’s not long before Caulston arrives. He bursts in, clearly unhappy with being told to come in here, rather than get started on the shoot. He stops cold on the doorframe, and then storms in and slams the door. He doesn’t notice Castle at all.
“You! How dare you demand I come up here! You’re just another dumb model, and you’re holding up an important shoot. Well, I’ll make sure you never get another booking here.” He starts to turn.

“You assaulted me.”

“Who’s gonna believe that? I’m important. You’re just a clothes horse.”

“You’re not denying it.”

“Don’t need to. No-one’ll believe it.” He turns again, and stops. “You might manage to get back in my good books, if you played along.”

“What do you mean?”

“You know what I mean. You liked it when I touched you. If you wanted to get some more…” he trails off insinuatingly.

“I should let you do it again so I get more work?”

“Get real, girl. You gotta give to get. Sure you should.” He puts a hand on the door.

“Get back here,” Beckett says, coldly and with absolute authority. He spins, shocked.

“How dare you use that tone to me? Don’t you know I can break you?”

“I don’t think so.” Beckett stands, and lets her jacket fall open to show the shield and gun. “I’m not a model. I’m a cop. Friday was an undercover operation.” Caulston’s jaw goes unpleasantly slack. “You’ve just admitted assault and you’ve demanded sexual favours so I get modelling work.” The temperature of the room has perceptibly dropped. “Terry Caulston, you are under arrest. Turn around. Hands behind your back.” She cuffs him.

“You can’t – you aren’t – you” –

“You picked the wrong mark. Touching up a cop? It’s not going to go down well in court. You’ll go down well in jail, though, pretty boy like you. You’ll make plenty of friends. They’ll touch you.”

“You bitch.”

“That’s Detective Bitch to you. You were happy enough to dish it out when you thought you had all the power, and now you don’t like the thought of it when it’s you on the other end?” She jerks him forward. “You know, I don’t feel sorry about that for a single minute.” She looks round. “Okay, Castle, let’s take him in.”

Caulston handed over to the custody sergeant and in Holding, Castle and Beckett return to the bullpen with Beckett, at least, in a much better mood. Arresting scumbags always improves her temper, and they’ve even managed a sandwich for lunch along the way.

Her temper is even more improved, to reach ferocious delight, when Avery presents Shaw and her with the money trail from one of Sevenelms’s businesses straight to Connor’s account.

“ Took me a little longer because he routed it through a couple of jurisdictions,” Avery says happily, “but it’s solid. Now, it’s from his company, so likely he’ll try and claim someone else did it, but it’s a dollar wire transfer and that means we could get the proof of authorisation.” He smiles sharply. “Sevenelms authorised the transfer. He’s going to have a hard time with that.”
“Even better,” rumbles the mobile mass of O’Leary, ambling up, “I got DNA results from San Francisco, and it shows both Connor and Sevenelms.”

“Anything from yesterday?”

“Beckett, you know it takes more than twelve hours. They put a rush on it, but it ain’t ready yet.”

Beckett mutters and grumbles. Of course she knows. She just wants her results so she can tie up Sevenelms with a ribbon and bow.

“Even without yesterday’s searches, I’d love to see how he’s going to slither out of this one,” Shaw says. “Good work.” She looks at Beckett. “I guess you’d like to do the honours?”

Beckett smiles. Actually, she bares her teeth in something that isn’t even a close cousin to a smile. “Oh, yes,” she says. “Now?”

“Why not?”

Beckett is on the phone to the custody sergeant in an instant, directing that Sevenelms be brought up to Interrogation. While she’s doing that, Shaw draws Castle aside.

“Will you be in there with her?”

“Yes,” he says firmly, unwilling to give place to Shaw when there’s blood in the water and the Beckett-shark is circling.

“Good. I’ll be in Observation.” She marches off. Castle watches her go, wondering about the slight constraint in Shaw’s tone. He’s distracted by Beckett’s sharp summons.

Beckett, Castle and Shaw watch Sevenelms from Observation, giving him time to wonder what’s awaiting him.

“When we arrested him,” Shaw says, “his first tactic was to try and claim you took the drugs yourself and then that it was all a mistake and he’d have our badges. I guess intimidation isn’t going to work on you, but that’s where he’ll begin.”

“I don’t intimidate easily.”

Or at all, Castle thinks.

“He got a hell of a fright when I told him you weren’t a drugged up model but an undercover cop and everything had been recorded.”

Beckett considers that. “Good. He hasn’t tried to claim immunity or any dumb trick like that?”

“Not yet. Hasn’t asked for a lawyer either.”

“It won’t help him if he does. We’ve got so much we can send him away for life – or San Francisco can have him, too.”

“Why do you want to interrogate him, then?”

Beckett pauses at Shaw’s question, and then speaks. “Because I want to look him in the eye and see him know that I brought him down.”
Shaw blinks, and shrugs. She obviously doesn’t see any issue at all with that. “Okay. I’ll stay here.”

They look at Sevenelms. He’s getting pretty antsy as his solitary time has stretched out.

“Let’s go do this, Castle.”

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“Brian Sevenelms.”

He doesn’t even look up.

“You’ve been arrested for attempted rape and murder, and we have evidence linking you to at least eight other rape-murders,” Beckett says conversationally. “Anything you’d like to say?”

He doesn’t say anything, nor does he look up.

“Okay. We don’t need you to say anything at all. Have a look at these instead.” She pushes a set of photos across the table. “That’s you. Looks as if you were enjoying yourself. These on their own’ll put you away for life. I don’t think the guys in Rikers have ever had a Brit before.”

Still no reaction.

“Of course, we have to work out who’s got jurisdiction.” He looks up, a flash of emotion across his face. “Oh, no. That’s between us and San Francisco.”

“I’m a British citizen. You can’t hold me.”

“Wrong. We can. You committed a crime here. You’re mine.”

“You trapped me. It’ll never stand up.”

“Funny, your pal said that too. It will. We have all the recordings of the whole day. We have these photos.”

“He faked them!”

“Really,” Beckett says, boredly. “Is that the best you can do? I’ve got DNA evidence putting you at the scene in San Francisco, and I’ve got your prints on the needle you used on me on Friday, and the recording of me not consenting to any of it. And pretty soon I’ll have evidence that” –

Esposito knocks, enters and beckons her out. Castle leaves too.

“Beckett, CSU sent over preliminary results. Sevenelms’s prints are all over Connor’s apartment.”

“Perfect timing, Espo. Just when I needed it. Anything else?”

“Naw.”

She goes back in. “As I was saying. Your prints are all over Connor’s apartment. He rolled on you – told me everything to try and save his own skin. We’ve got you.”

“It’s all circumstantial.”

“Don’t give me that. I have direct evidence. I didn’t even need to interview you, but I wanted you to know that I’ve got you wrapped up tight. Enjoy Rikers. Or Death Row in California. You and
Connor can keep each other company.”

“Death Row?” he cries. “You can’t” –

“I won’t. A judge and jury will. But I’m the one who’ll have made sure that they do.”

And on that cold, triumphant note, she leaves.

“Nicely done, Detective Beckett,” Shaw says as she exits Observation.

“Thanks.”

Castle makes straight for the break room, and only just resists actually towing Beckett with him, possibly because she’s aiming for it too. He competently starts the machine, and is mildly unsurprised that Ryan, O’Leary and, more draggingly, Esposito, all arrive in short order. The break room is very crowded.

“Just loose ends to tidy up now,” Ryan says. “That’ll put the extra lock on their box.”

“Yeah.” Beckett is still running on the adrenaline of the morning. “I brought the dresser in, too.”

“Dresser?”

“Yeah. Thought it was a perk of his job to assault the models.”

Esposito’s face turns black. “Yeah?” he grates. “Maybe I should have a chat.”

“I don’t think you need to help Beckett,” Castle says. “He doesn’t have any skin left from her little chat earlier, when she arrested him.”


“He shouldn’t be” –

“And you shouldn’t be interfering when I’ve dealt with it,” she says very sharply. “We had this discussion.”

Nobody admits to the whistled intake of breath that splits the tense atmosphere.

“I said that I was up for this to put these guys away. I said if I had to put up with pawing then you bunch were damn well to live with it – so do it. I don’t want to hear any more about it. They’re all in the cells. We got the job done. That’s all that matters. Finished, done, over.” She stops. “We’re going to tie up the loose ends, and that’s it.”

“But” –

“No buts. It’s just another case and we’ve closed it.”

Castle watches O’Leary’s bland, moon-sized face, and wonders what he’s thinking, because Castle is not at all sure that it’s what Beckett’s thinking.

“Right. What do we need to finish up? Ryan, you start.”

Beckett having settled herself back at her desk with Ryan in tow, O’Leary having lumbered back
out of the break room to his desk in the expectation of being next for the tidy-up talk, Castle is left
in the break room with Esposito and no coffee yet. On many levels, this is unpleasant. He can
sense Esposito’s darkling expression without turning round, and does precisely nothing to alleviate
it, concentrating on making the perfect cup of coffee.

“I wanna talk to you,” Espo growls.

“Do you? Why?”

There is a chilly silence as Esposito processes that Castle isn’t in the mood to make anything easy
for him. It stretches out as Castle drinks his coffee, not hurrying, and not talking. This departure
from his usual cheerfully insane chatter does nothing for Esposito’s tension.

“I… you gotta help me fix things with Beckett.”

“Do I? Why?”

Another edged, nasty pause.

“Cause the team ain’t right.”

“What’s that got to do with me?”

Castle is going to force Esposito to admit that he, Castle, is as vital to the team as Espo or Ryan,
and he doesn’t much care how it gripes Esposito’s guts along the way. He waits.

“I shouldn’t’a got pissed with you for that whole loft business,” Espo forces out, each word bitten
off short. “It wasn’t” – Castle hears all, but Espo doesn’t say it – “your fault.” He swallows down
acid-bitter pride. “I was wrong ‘bout you.” Castle still says nothing. “I should’a kept out of it.”

“Yeah,” Castle says slowly, not giving an inch.

“It was up to Beckett.” Espo’s face twists. “She wants you on the team.”

“So? If you can’t stop bitching at me, it’s still not going to work out. You want the team fixed, or
not?”

“A’course I do.”

“Then it’s up to you. I never did anything to you, and you’re blaming me for things that aren’t
yours to own.” Castle downs the last of his drink.

“You were s’posed to fix it,” Esposito jerks out. Castle stops his move to the door.

“Fix what?”

“Her mom’s case.”

“What?”

The Esposito dam breaks. “I got you in ‘cause I thought you’d find answers, an’ then you did but
she didn’t wanna know. I never expected that. I thought she’d be happy.”

Castle sees far more, far faster, than Esposito appreciates. “So you blamed me for your fuck-up –
and left me to take all the flak. Pretty low.” Espo winces.
“So I told her I let you have the file. Saturday. An’ she threw me out an’ hasn’t said a word to me since.”

“So Saturday. I see. Took you almost a year to ‘fess up. Why now?” he says conversationally. It doesn’t look like the gentle tone improves Espo’s mood any. “Funny how it’s happening when there’s another cop around who works well with Beckett. Scared that the team’s going to change?” He breathes, and calms his rage to cold. “Scared she’ll ditch you instead of me?”

“No! She ain’t going to bring O’Leary in.”

“You don’t sound sure about that.”

“She won’t,” he insists.

“Won’t what?” Ryan asks from the doorway, breaking the suffocating tension. Both men scowl at him. Ryan is undeterred. “You two need to sort your shit out before Beckett starts on you. She’s almost done with O’Leary. I reckon you got about five minutes.” He looks between them. “Espo, you gotta fix this fast. Castle hasn’t done anything wrong that you got the right to be pissed about. Man up an’ apologise.” He exits, fast, leaving stunned astonishment behind him.

“What’s that all about?” Castle asks, shocked out of his cold rage by Ryan’s intervention. He didn’t expect that. Maybe Ryan’s finally come down on the right side. It gives him a good feeling.

“Ryan laid into me. An’ that monster O’Leary.” Espo mumbles. “Every fuckin’ one of ‘em’s on your side an’ you ain’t even a cop. Beckett won’t even look at me without scowling. All I wanted was to have her back like I always do and she ain’t having any of it.” He subsides into a black pit of embarrassment.

“Maybe you should stick to having her back on the job and leave her personal life alone. You’re not her keeper.” Castle doesn’t mention that he’d heard Beckett tearing the boys apart for it.

“Sounds to me like you’re angry that you fucked up and you’re taking it out on me. I don’t think you’re jealous” – Esposito makes a strangulated noise – “but you’re sure behaving like you’ve got the right to be protective. I get where you’re coming from – you think it was easy for me to stand by and watch her get mauled and shot up with heroin? – but she won’t thank me for getting in her way and it sounds like she didn’t thank you for it either.” He shrugs. “You said you wanted to fix things, well, you got your chance now. I’m listening.”

Espósito swallows hard. Admitting he’d been wrong isn’t his favourite game.

“You’re right. All of you. I was wrong an’… an’ I’m sorry. You’re as much the team as we are.”

“Accepted,” Castle says.

Espósito gapes. “That it? We’re cool?”

“I don’t hold grudges,” Castle says, though it’s not entirely true and apology or not it’ll take him some time to be cool with Espo. “Like you said, the team needs to be tight. Yeah?”

“Yeah. All four of us.”
Castle watches Beckett efficiently divest Esposito of all information and give him a list of matters to clear up to ensure that Sevenelms and Connor haven’t a hope of extricating so much as a fingertip from their crimes. He notices most particularly that she doesn’t banter or even display anything other than professionalism. With every exchange, Esposito’s demeanour slumps a fraction more.

Castle isn’t the only one who notices. O’Leary does, too. And, O’Leary regarding himself in the light of Beckett’s big brother (accent firmly on big there), O’Leary is inclined to do something about it. It can’t have been that easy for Esposito to admit his mistake, and Beckett shouldn’t overdo the penalty – even if she can cuddle a grudge long after it’s dead an’ rotted. A brief exchange with Ryan has informed him that Espo was tryin’ to apologise to Castle, though he’d been makin’ hard goin’ of it, and from the more relaxed expressions on both Espo and Castle’s faces, they’d patched it up. Or Espo’d finally done the right thing, none too soon.

Anyways, O’Leary intends to have a cosy little down-home chat with Beckett, who could use a little big-brotherly, homespun advice. His only problem, then, is how to keep Castle out of the way. Sure, he’s a good guy an’ he’s good for Beckett, but Beckett likely isn’t goin’ to be any too happy ‘bout what he’ll be sayin’, an’ she sure won’t appreciate an audience. Besides which, he, O’Leary, wants to make sure she’s okay. She’s been pretty darn edgy since she got let out the hospital, an’ he thinks there’s somethin’ she’s not tellin’. And one more besides, he’s goin’ to be back in his own shop pretty shortly an’ he wants to get a happy endin’ before he goes, as well as the closed case.

He sighs sappily. He likes happy endings. Everyone should get one. Even Espo. Well, mebbe not those dirtbags in the cells, but all his pals. Now, how’s he goin’ to get Castle out of the way? The easiest way might just be to ask him, O’Leary reckons. An’ surely the man must need to see his family occasionally?

The next time Beckett departs her desk in the direction of the restroom, O’Leary taps Castle on the shoulder and gestures him to a conference room which, unlike the break room, is both out of Beckett’s sightline (not that this will really help when she notices Castle’s absence, but hey, eggs and omelettes and all that) and is not subject to interruption by the caffeine hunting bullpen – though O’Leary allows as how the coffee here at the Twelfth is pretty top-notch stuff, an’ he’ll miss it when he gets back to his own shop.

“What is it?” Castle asks.

“Wanted to ask you to give me ‘n’ Beckett some space this evenin’,” he rumbles.

“Why are you asking me? Ask her.”

“I’m goin’ to, but I don’t want you gettin’ upset or pissy.”

“Up to Beckett who she goes out with,” Castle says irritably. “I don’t own her.”

“Naw, never said you did. But seein’ as you pair have patched it up an’ you’re all lovey-dovey together – aww,” he adds mischievously, though Castle growls, “likely iffen I don’t ask you to back off you’ll come along, an’ I don’t want you to.”

“You know,” Castle says conversationally, “I don’t think that’s up to you. I think that’s up to
Beckett. If she wants me there, I’m coming. If she doesn’t, I won’t.” He looks up at O’Leary’s bland expression. “So you’d better ask her.”

O’Leary beams brightly at him. “Nice to know you’re not as dumb as some. I know somethin’s up with her, an’ I’m pretty sure you know what it is, but I don’t wanna know ‘less she tells me herself.” He beams more blindingly. “Let’s go, before she notices. She might be little, but she packs a mean punch.”

Castle automatically touches his nose, to make sure its handsome profile has not been damaged by Beckett’s talons. Not that she’s tweaked his nose or ears since her apartment blew up. They haven’t been on those terms. They’re still not on those terms. Cuddles and snuggles and one single night of sex notwithstanding, they aren’t on anything like their previously-familiar, snark-and-banter, snap and sparkle and sexual spark terms, no matter how he’d tried to bring it back.

But they’ll get there. He has to believe that. He only hopes that Beckett does.

And if she does, that she can get there. They really need to talk. They really, really need to talk about it. Because, all three men now in custody, she doesn’t look so good. Tired, as if she hadn’t slept well: and he remembers all her nightmares the previous night.

He follows O’Leary out, a heaviness to his gait.

“Beckett,” O’Leary says, “you ‘n’ me need to have a chat. Shift’s almost over, so come ‘n’ get a beer with me.”

“Who else is coming?”

“No-one. Just you ‘n’ me, like it was back in the day.”

Beckett regards him with extreme scepticism. “You’re plotting. I can tell. Why d’you want a chat?”

“To chaw over olden times with my pal,” O’Leary says with enough folksiness to populate a village. “C’mon. You look ‘s if you could use a beer. Guess you won’t want wine.”

Beckett shudders. “No way. Okay. Let’s go.” She looks around. “Castle?” He stops playing with his phone, knowing what’s coming. “We’re going for a beer. O’Leary wants someone to hold his hand while Pete’s out of town, ‘cause he can’t handle beer till he’s all grown up.”

“Hey!” O’Leary says indignantly. “I’m plenty grown up.”

“Yeah, you’re just still growing up.” Castle snickers at Beckett’s words. “Anyway, since if I don’t go and hold his hand he’ll probably just pick me up like a haybale” –

“Don’t be dumb, you’re much lighter than a haybale” –

“We’d better go.”

“Sure. I won’t come.”

She meets Castle’s eyes. “I’ll call you later, then. O’Leary’s got no head for liquor” – he squawks, as does Castle – “so it won’t be late.”

“I don’t mind if you call me late at night,” Castle oozes, deciding to try to get back some – any – of their previous sparks. “So many interesting things can happen late at night.”

Beckett rolls her eyes, in a pleasantly familiar fashion. “In your dreams,” she snips.
“Oh, I love it when you’re in my dreams – ow!”

As Castle watches them depart, and collects himself together for the same purpose, he thinks that whether she was acting for O’Leary’s benefit or not, the temporary pain in his earlobe is a welcome return to some sort of normality.

His home is, for once, peaceful. His mother is not present, and Alexis is upstairs – he can hear the strains of violin practice, though it’s certainly not the smooth, confident playing that he’s been used to. It’s not going well, he determines, from the amount of stopping and starting and discords going on. Music is not soothing the savage breast today.

“Hey, pumpkin,” he calls up, at another break in the flow.

“Dad?”

Alexis drags down the stairs. She looks, if it were possible, even less happy than she had on Saturday, and again last night, when she’d emerged for only long enough to say goodnight, and this morning, when he hadn’t seen her at all. Castle’s fatherly heart wobbles.

“Come here,” he says, and takes the two steps to hug his miserable daughter. “Talk to me.”

“I know I have to but I can’t,” Alexis wails, reduced to a pre-teen by the weight of her behaviour. “I can’t go to the precinct and everyone looking at me and listening in.”

“Who said you had to go to the precinct?” Castle asks reasonably. “That doesn’t sound like a good plan.”

“I don’t?”

Alexis has clearly built the need to apologise into a film-set drama in a very teenage over-emotional fashion. She seems to be picturing some publicly humiliating apology in the presence of a massive audience of – Castle recalls her commentary – Beckett-revering cops who’ll be openly hostile.

“No. If you’re ready to apologise, we’ll find somewhere that doesn’t have an audience. Neutral ground, like for peace treaties.”

“You will?” she gulps, and sniffs into him as she’s done as a much smaller Alexis.

“If you want to make it right, I’ll do everything I can to help.”

“Thanks, Dad,” she sniffs. He hugs her again.

“That’s what dads are for. Helping you get it right. Now, do you want me to ask Beckett where she’d like?”

Alexis moves back and looks up at him, her blue eyes drenched and red-rimmed. She sets her jaw. “Yes,” she whispers damply.

“Okay. We can straighten all this out.” He hopes. Beckett will – he is almost sure – accept the apology. What she might not do is be on the same good terms with Alexis as she had been during the week Alexis had been in the precinct. That will take some time to return, if it ever does. This isn’t an episode of the Waltons, and Alexis had been – albeit led into it – profoundly wrong.

Thinking of which…
“Alexis, has your mom been calling you?”

“A bit. Even though I don’t have my phone she’s been calling here. But I don’t wanna talk to her but I don’t know how to stop it. When I thought she was on my side it wasn’t a problem but now she’s just trying the same lines and now I see what she’s doing I can’t believe I was so dumb and I just feel so awful that I believed her and…” She dissolves in a small puddle of self-blame.

“She’s very convincing, and you didn’t know what she was doing. Next time, though, talk to me first, okay? If you’d asked me, I’d have told you the truth. Haven’t I always?”

“Yes. But she was so convincing…”

Castle thinks bitterly that if Meredith had shown that sort of acting talent in auditions she’d have been a multiple Oscar nominee by now.

“She is an actor,” he says mildly. “Now, you go off and do your homework and practice while I make dinner and then we can have a nice evening. I’ll beat you at Scrabble.”

“I’m not playing Scrabble with you. You cheat.”

“I do not! I merely have an excellent vocabulary.”

“You cheat, too.”

“Be off with you. I’ll tell you when it’s dinner time.”

It seems to Castle that – Beckett permitting – the worst of his daughter’s idiocy might be solved. All he needs to do is find some neutral ground and time. His heart lightens. Espo – more or less solved; his daughter – more or less solvable, soon; that only leaves the other problem. Beckett’s reaction to the whole undercover op. Clear away the first two, though, and the third is – well, less daunting.

“O’Leary, I’m sick of Molloys. Can’t we go somewhere else?”

“I like it,” he rumbles plaintively.

“You like it ‘cause they’ve got your beer open before you’ve closed the door.”

“Yep, so that’s where we’re goin’. Stop fussin’. You like it too.”

“You go there because it meant you could make sure I got home okay,” she says crossly. “’S not true any more.”

“You knew?”

“Sure I knew. Totally unnecessary, but it was sorta sweet.” O’Leary is blushing spectacularly. “You don’t do subtle. Like tonight. What did you wanna say that you couldn’t say in the bullpen?”

“Let’s get our beer first,” O’Leary advises, and refuses to say anything more till they reach, much to Beckett’s vocal disgust, Molloys.

“So I hear Espo’s been ‘fessin’ up,” he says, in between swigs and the crunching of chips. “Hear as you din’t take it so well.”

“Yeah, sure. But don’t make it into a bigger problem than it needs to be.” Beckett raises an exceedingly cynical eyebrow. “Okay, he’s been” –

“Is being” –

“Mebbe not. Just hear me out. This ain’t one of your complicated murders, nor yet it ain’t Castle, who’s complicated enough to get you.” He smiles sweetly. “You two are just so cute, makes my heart happy to look at you.”

“Ugh.”

“Anyways, Espo ain’t complicated. He’s made up with Ryan, he’s made up with Castle, but you ain’t givin’ him an inch yet.”

“He’s not asking me to.” Beckett scowls, which has never affected O’Leary in their long friendship and isn’t affecting him now. “But I’m not having him behaving like I’m some dumb chick with no brain and no guts and needing him to protect me from every breath of wind. And I’m not impressed that he let Castle take all the blame for last summer, either. I expected better from Espo.”

“Waaaallll, an’ so did I, for sure,” he drawls, vibrating small tables and the beer bottles. “An’ I’m not denyin’ he screwed up big-time an’ he’s had his head up his ass about Castle ever since. Though I do hear that feelin’ guilty can do that to a man.”

“Yeah.”

“Still an’ all, you don’t need to make it worse.”

Beckett’s face turns cold. “Espo needs to stop trying to pull his macho crap on me, fast. I’m not having it. He needs to get that, and right now he’s not getting it. If he doesn’t pull it back, he’ll try it out on the job, and then we’ll really have a problem. He doesn’t get subtle, and he hasn’t shown me that he’s got it.” She chugs back a third of her beer bottle.

O’Leary slugs his own beer back, orders another two, and contemplates Beckett’s set face with an amiable smile. “You don’t need no macho crap, or protection. I’d’a said the rest needed protection from you,” he grins.

“Yeah, well. You try knocking that through Espo’s concrete skull.”

“You told him?”

“Sure I did.”

“When?”

“Week ago.”

“An’ he let Castle into the file a year ago, yeah?”

“You’re saying that he isn’t pulling macho crap now? You heard him earlier, aiming to go after Caulsfield for pawing me even though I’d already dealt with it. He needs to stop that cold. If you were gonna say that it was all in the past and maybe he’d got the point when I told him a week ago, then he hasn’t.”

O’Leary buzzes thoughtfully to himself for a while. That sure is a bit more of a problem than he’d
“Dumb of Espo, for sure.”

“Guess you’ll just have to tell him again.”

“Yes. Can’t beat him on the mat, can’t outshoot the sniper. I’ll just have to beat it into his hard head.”

“I c’n lend you a drill, iffen you need to make a hole in it.”

“I might just take you up on that,” Beckett grins. “Nothing else seems to be working.”

“Give it a go. He’s mis’rable, an’ it makes the bullpen soggy. Mebbe he just needs to know to back off. Mebbe he’s worried you’d change the team on him, an’ he’s tryin’ to prove you shouldn’t.”

“Mm,” Beckett hums. “We’ll see.”

O’Leary, moderately satisfied with the results of the first part of his chat, relapses into beer, tortilla chips in industrial quantities, and stories of the vagaries of Central Park precinct, which experiences an unusually large number of weird and strange passers-through, and then adds the tourists to its other problems. Shortly Beckett is in fits of laughter, which had rather been O’Leary’s game. He doesn’t think there’s been a lot of laughter in Beckett’s life for the last few weeks. Everyone should switch off once in a way, an’ since she’s not takin’ it from anyone else, it’s down to him.

“The beer gettin’ to you, butterfly?”

“Don’t call me that,” she complains. “S not fair. Bigfoot. And no, the beer is not getting to me. My head’s just as hard as yours, and I’m not the size of a mountain.”

“Good. ‘Cause there’s somethin’ else.”

“Oh, for God’s sake, O’Leary. If you wanna be an agony aunt, go practice on someone else. I’m fine.”

“Waal, I know you an’ Castle patched it up, but that ain’t what I was goin’ to ask you.”

“Mm?”

“Seemed to me,” O’Leary says very cautiously, “that this case hit pretty close to home. Rubbed a few spots raw.”

Beckett shrugs. “I do the job. They’re going away for ever. Good enough for me.”

“Good enough to make up for bein’ drugged?”

“Yes.”

“’Kay then. But iffen you’re not fine – an’ I know that fine is what you say even if you’re bleedin’ out on the floor – you come talk to me or you go talk to someone.”

“Yes, Mommy,” Beckett says sarcastically.

“No call for that tone.”

“I’m fine. Are you finished that beer, ‘cause I think I should see you home in case Pete gets worried.”
“Now who’s playin’ Mom?” O’Leary grins. “I don’t need you to see me home. An’ you live too far up for me to wanna go with you.”

“Key point, that. You’re the biggest mother hen in creation.”

“Awk,” O’Leary squawks, and flaps his elbows in imitation of a chicken. Possibly a dinosaur-sized chicken. “Nobody else is goin’ to tell you when you’re off-kilter, Beckett.”

“Just as well I’m not, then.”

Which O’Leary doesn’t believe for one single solitary second, but he’s not getting anywhere an’ Beckett’s not above walkin’ out if he pushes her too hard. Anyways, Castle’ll get it out of her. He can leave it to him. Much better for O’Leary’s good health. Especially as he thinks that it’s somethin’ to do with the modellin’, an’ the history, an’ – he’s not dumb, an’ more was goin’ on in that undercover op than just lettin’ herself be doped: he hadn’t missed that she was down to her underwear though it don’t make no difference to him – bein’ damn close to raped an’ murdered. She’s helluva tough, Beckett, but that’s a lot to deal with. Still, like Espo, that’s her issue to work out. Not his. He ambles home, perfectly happy.

Beckett does not amble home. Beckett strides home with a somewhat irritated clack of each heel, not sitting down on the subway train through sheer inability to relax. She gets where O’Leary’s at, and he’s her oldest friend, even including Lanie, but he’s not quite seeing the Espo problem. She guesses that’s not surprising. O’Leary doesn’t do the macho bit – because no-one with half a brain cell would bother to challenge him. Still, maybe he’s right. He’s dealt with a fair few personnel problems, and he’s run a few of those by her too. She shouldn’t bridle at his input. She’ll try knocking sense into Espo again, tomorrow.

On the other hand, O’Leary has no business prying into how she felt about the whole undercover op. That’s not his business. If she needs any help working that out, she’ll do it with Castle. She’s not discussing any of the messy interplays with anyone else.
“Castle,” Castle says, knowing perfectly well it’s Beckett, “at your service. Do you want good books, good company or good” –

“Stop right there.”

“I gotta know right now,” Castle sings mischievously, “before we go any further” –

“Shut up, or I’ll wish I hadn’t called.”


“Are you five? Anyway, I have called. Though I’m not sure why.”

“Because you said you would,” Castle says much more seriously. “Anyway, if you hadn’t I’d have called you. Um… Alexis wants to apologise. But she doesn’t want to do it in the bullpen and I agree and can we find a neutral place so that she can say sorry but it’s not a public show?” His speech has got faster and faster till the last words trip over each other.

“I don’t think the bullpen is the place,” Beckett says slowly, trying to buy herself time to think. She absolutely does not want to be a public spectacle. Right now, she’d rather not deal with Alexis at all: she’s got enough on her plate with Espo’s dumbass behaviour; but on the other hand, it would take one thorn out of her metaphorical paw. She had accepted, after Castle’s explanation, that teens do teenage things – though if she ever meets Meredith again, her tolerance will not be extensive. All she has to do is accept it with grace and let it be. Let go of her own annoyance and hurt.

“Where would you like?” Castle asks.

Somewhere she can escape quickly, is the truthful answer to that. She doesn’t say that. “Let me think about it.”

“Okay.” She can hear a note of some relief. “Are you okay?”

“Sure. Why wouldn’t I be?”

“Er…” He stops. “We need to talk.” Beckett unwittingly sucks in a harsh breath. “About the op, and those photos, and… and we need to clear it all up because it’s poison and it’s poisoning us already.”

Not another thing. She can’t cope with all these things at once. She really can’t. “No.” It’s Castle’s turn for a sharp breath. “Not now. I can’t. You want me to let Alexis apologise and Espo’s got his head in his ass and now you want this too all at once. I can’t do it now. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

She swipes the phone off and slumps down on her couch. It’s too much. She’s still staring into the empty space of her main room long minutes later: stopped. Finally she goes and has a shower, still vacant, still overburdened by one emotional demand too many when she hasn’t calmed her emotions properly from the previous days. What she needs is time out, and she finds it under the hot water and in the delicate scent of her bodywash and shampoo: the one constant small extravagance within her currently limited finances. She stays under the shower until her skin has wrinkled and the steam has neutralised her thoughts, and then, mind empty, moisturises and slides, early as it is, into bed.
Her bed linen doesn’t carry Castle’s scent any more. Maybe that’s why the nightmares are worse.

Castle stares at his phone and the cut call. She’d just shut it all down and flatly told him she couldn’t cope with all of it. And what does she mean Espo’s got his head in his ass? What’s Espo got to do with anything?

He can’t even go over. He needs to be here, and anyway if it’s too much now, it’ll certainly be too much face to face.

He just wishes he didn’t think that she’s putting it off. Maybe she’s just clearing out the undergrowth first: the minor issues – for her, Alexis is a minor issue: for him it’s major: Alexis and Beckett have to be on civil terms – so that she’s got headspace for the rest of it.

He does what he always does when he’s not sure of his ground, and buries himself in his writing. There, at least, the characters behave in the way he expects and controls. If only real life was that simple.

Beckett drags herself into the bullpen while her body is still crying out for the sleep she hadn’t managed – and wouldn’t have managed even had she stayed in bed till noon. However, tired as she is, her morning shower had reminded her of one thing: that damn transmitter is still in her arm, and she wants it out. If she hadn’t quit the hospital so quickly, she could have asked them to take it out, she thinks bleakly. Now she’s remembered it’s there, it’s irritating, like a mosquito bite, and she keeps rubbing it, which doesn’t help.

She tries to concentrate on her list of loose ends which they’re all tidying up, while keeping one eye out for Agent Avery, who will remove this transmitter if he knows what’s good for him.

She barely allows Avery to sit down before she’s in the conference room.

“Hey,” she says, briskly. “Now that we’re done, can you take the transmitter out?”

Avery blinks. “Uh, you’ll need to get it cut out. I can’t do that.”

“What?” Beckett ejaculates. “You didn’t tell me that.”

“We’ll get you an appointment. You just need a bit of anaesthetic and a stitch or two. It’ll be quick and painless,” Avery says airily.

“Have you done this yourself?” Beckett growls.

“Well, no, but…” He stops under her fulminating look. “I’ll make you an appointment with our usual doctor right now,” he gabbles. Beckett stalks out. Agent quick-and-painless-idiot Avery is already dialling as she goes.

“Do you really need to terrorise my agent, Detective Beckett?” Shaw asks, with sardonic humour.

“Yes,” she growls.

Shaw blinks, and continues on to acquire a cup of coffee. Shortly thereafter, she returns to Beckett’s desk, and sits down in Castle’s chair.

“We’re pretty much done,” Shaw says. “Good work all round.”

“Thanks.”
“It’s quite normal for it to take a while to get over that sort of a case,” Shaw says delicately.

“I’m fine. Thank you for your concern.”

“Don’t be stupid here, Detective. If you’re still not sleeping properly after a few days, go see someone to talk it through.” She catches Beckett’s expression. “You remember that it was me who was tied to a chair with explosives at my feet and a madman threatening to kill us all, six weeks ago?” Colour rises in Beckett’s face. “You’re not the only one who takes on lethal risks. There’s no shame in needing to talk it through. I did.” Shaw rises. “Think about it. There are no prizes for being a martyr.”

Beckett watches Shaw depart and feels rather foolish. She hadn’t considered that Shaw had been through the same stress, without the cavalry a moment behind. Possibly without the history, though, which is what’s really messing with Beckett’s head. She puts that thought into the box marked Later On, and goes back to the two instant issues: Esposito, and Alexis.

Alexis is easier. She just has to think of some neutral ground. So not Castle’s loft, not her apartment – hell, no – and definitely not anywhere in which a meal might be ordered. Given Alexis’s teen status, bars are out. That leaves coffee bars. She consults her encyclopaedic knowledge of the coffee bars of lower Manhattan, and rapidly decides on Think Coffee, on Mercer Street, with a mild edge of malice, as that coffee bar is proudly Fair Trade. Alexis might not notice the point she’s making. Castle certainly will. The memory of we only buy organic still bites. Okay, done. She’ll tell Castle when he appears. Might as well do it today, and get it over with.

Now for Esposito. She winces. This is not going to be any fun at all. She ponders how best to deal with him for a while, without getting any further than blunt honesty. This won’t get better for waiting, either. She doesn’t want the situation to escalate to a point where Montgomery might take an interest. Very undesirable, that. Very undesirable. She has no desire at all to explain the interactions between the team (including Castle) over the last few weeks, and Montgomery is a master of winkling out every last detail. So she’d better woman up and get this fixed.

“Esposito,” she says briskly.

“Yo?”

“A word.” She’s borrowed that phrase and tone from Montgomery, who uses it to strike fear into the very definitely suspecting hearts of cops throughout the Twelfth. She is pleased to note that it has the same effect when she uses it.

She leads the way to a conference room and firmly shuts the door.

“We need to talk,” she says, and fixes him with a hard look. “You need to drop the macho crap and stop trying to protect me. I don’t need it and I don’t want it. If you don’t think I can do the job, you tell me so now. Otherwise, the next time you try it you’ll be having a discussion with Montgomery. This is your last chance, Espo. You thought you’d protect me from not solving my mom’s case, you thought you’d protect me from the consequences of fighting with Castle, and even after I told you to butt out of my life, you thought I needed you to protect me from that asshole Caulsfield. You don’t get any more warnings. You’re saying that I can’t do the job without you protecting” – there’s a steel-sharpened edge there, as she deploys the knife that at any moment could cut him from the team – “me, and we can’t work like that. Quit it, or quit the team.”

“But…” Esposito’s face has turned grey.

“No more buts. No more chances. You stop this now, or you tell me, and then Montgomery, why I
can’t do the job.”

“I didn’t mean it like that,” he insists.

“I don’t care, Espo. I don’t care how you meant it. It’s how it is. I don’t wanna break the team, but it’s not me who’s screwing up here. I’m a cop. That’s the end of it. You wouldn’t act this way with Ryan or LT, so you don’t do it with me.”

“You ain’t being fair, Beckett.”

“How so?”

“You’re saying I don’t trust you.” She nods, and Espo stares back at her, appalled. “I do. You got my back same as I do yours or Ryan’s. I never doubted that.”

“You’re behaving like you do.”

“No. I reckoned he’d get you answers an’ then it would be done. An’ then he did but you didn’t an’ I blamed him.”

“You went behind my back.”

“Deniability!” Espo yells. “If you didn’t know you couldn’t get busted for it. Montgomery would’a blamed it on Castle’s poke-nosing, an’ I’d’a got a dressing down but if you’d known you’d’a got more than that.”

Beckett blinks, slowly. That hadn’t occurred to her. “Or I would have told you no,” she says coldly. “It wasn’t your choice to make. It was mine.” She pauses, judicially remote, as Espo shrinks. “And then you felt guilty but you didn’t tell me what you’d done. You let me believe it was all Castle, all on his own. That’s why you’ve been so unfriendly.”

She pauses again, but Esposito doesn’t say anything: hunched and unhappy across the table.

“And then you thought you had an excuse for it. You thought that he’d made me unhappy. Setting aside that you had no right to get upset with anyone just because they might have made me unhappy, because you got no right to interfere with my personal life unless I asked you, which I didn’t; setting that aside, I think you just used that to justify being an asshole. You didn’t try to find out any of the truth, you just assumed it was all Castle’s fault because that way you didn’t have to feel guilty any more.”

Her mouth twists bitterly. “If you worked cases like that, you’d be out. That’s not having my back. That’s sheer stupidity. That’s not trusting me. That’s believing that you know what’s best for me without even asking. And if you do that once, you’ll do it again. You’ll believe I don’t know what I’m doing on the job, without even asking.” Her voice has dropped to quiet danger. “I’m the senior detective here, and you are not. There’s a reason for that.” She has never before had to remind Esposito that she’s in charge. “If you disagree with that, you know what to do.” Another pause. “If not, you don’t go looking to argue with my arrests. You don’t go looking for fights with perps who’ve looked at me sideways. You accept my decisions. You don’t second-guess me afterwards.”

She waits. The seconds string out, as overstretched as snapping-point elastic.

“I don’t,” he blurts. “You… it works. But…”

“But what? This is your last chance to get everything out on the table.”
“But he” – Beckett’s heart sinks. Esposito hasn’t listened to anything, has he? – “but this case…” Oh. Wrong ‘he’. “You can’t expect any of us to like that.”

“No. But I can expect you to swallow it. If I can, you can. End of.”

Esposito looks like she’s asked him to swallow a live wasp. She holds his gaze steadily. This is a battle she didn’t want to fight, but it’s one she has to win.

He drops his eyes first.

“Kay,” he says. “I wanna stay with this team.”

“Which includes Castle,” Beckett says sharply.

“Yeah.” She waits. “Four of us.”

“Right.” She stands up, tall and straight: no hint that there’s any way but her way. “Four of us.” She leans over, both hands flat on the table, and holds his gaze again. “Last chance, Espo. Don’t pull this crap again. I don’t want the team to break – but if it’s not working, I’ll change it.”

“You made your point.”

“I thought I’d made it last time,” she fires back. “I don’t want any misunderstandings.”

“There ain’t. I got it.”

“Good. Now, let’s get on with solving murders. That’s what we do best.”

She leaves the conference room without looking back, and makes straight for the stairwell, which even in the May warmth is cool and quiet. That… had not been pleasant. But it’s done. It’s up to Espo now. She only hopes that he takes the right route, because their team has worked, up till now, and if he’ll just straighten out his head it’ll all be working again. It wouldn’t be the same without him.

She walks back out, intending to investigate the soothing properties of hot caffeine. It’s still too early for Castle – not nine a.m. yet – but the machine is always there.

“Ah, Detective Beckett,” Montgomery’s dulcet tones reverberate. “A word, please.”

Beckett finds herself as terrified as Esposito had been when she said the same. “Yes, sir.” She follows him into his office, and at his authoritative gesture, closes the door.

“I’ve been observing your team, Beckett,” – she tries not to cringe – “while you’ve been working with those Feds.” He waits. Montgomery is the unquestioned master of the ominous pause. Beckett, however, is wise to his wily ways and doesn’t succumb to the temptation to fill the silence. “Things don’t seem to have been as smooth as usual.” Another pause which Beckett doesn’t fill. Montgomery stops that tactic. “What’s been going on?”

“Nothing, sir. The case was a bit unpleasant, that’s all.”

Montgomery regards her straightly and raises both Captainly eyebrows. Beckett manages not to flinch.

“Really? I haven’t forgotten how to be a detective yet, Beckett. There’s been trouble in the team. Do I need to take notice of it?”
“No, sir. I’ve dealt with it.”

“Mm. Dismissed.”

“Sir,” Beckett says, and escapes. Now she really needs that coffee.

Castle wanders in around ten to see if anything interesting is happening on the case apart from paperwork and weaving in the last loose ends; more importantly to see if Beckett has come up with a neutral venue to meet Alexis; and finally and even more vitally, to see if Beckett is okay.

When he places her coffee neatly where it will automatically connect with her seeking hand, she looks up.

“Hey.”

Castle sums up her disturbed night in one apparently-casual glance. “Good morning,” he carols. It is, in fact, a beautiful morning, which helps.

“I thought about a neutral venue and we can go to Think Coffee, at Mercer and West Third.”

Castle thinks for a second, doesn’t manage to conceal the wince, and nods. “I don’t mind if it’s Fair Trade,” he says mildly. “Though I guess Alexis will take the point too.”

“Yeah,” Beckett says neutrally.

“She really wants to apologise.”

“Yeah. So you said. So I’m listening.”

“You don’t have to,” Castle tests.

“Teens do dumb things. If it matters to her to apologise, then I’ll accept it. It’s more than most would do.” Castle winces, again.

“Look,” he says, “she screwed up. I know that. But she wants to make it right. Give her credit for trying.”

“I am. Otherwise I wouldn’t even bother listening to her. If I didn’t know that your ex had fomented this, so it’s not all her fault, I wouldn’t. So let’s just get it over with and be done. Then we can all move on.”

Castle tries to decipher that into something that makes sense. He thinks she means: it’s mostly Meredith’s fault so I’ll let Alexis apologise and then it can all be forgotten. That’ll do. Alexis will just have to deal with the fact that she’ll never be on the same easy terms with Beckett as she could have been – as she had been when she did her civics week. Beckett, not being a parent, isn’t precisely forgiving as easily as a parent might – and to be honest, nor should she. Alexis is sixteen, not six, and she should have behaved better. He’d have understood a row, but not the manipulative dishonesty.

“Okay,” he says. “I’ll need to go home to tell her. When will you be off shift?”

“Six. Why do you need to go home? Just text her.”

“She doesn’t have her phone.”
Beckett raises her eyebrows. “She’s a teen. Surely it’s surgically attached?”

“I took it away,” Castle says shortly. “Along with her laptop. And I grounded her.”

Beckett stares at him. “You did what?”

“Didn’t I say?”

“No.”

“Oh. Well, I did. As soon as I found out what she’d done.”

“You took her phone away?” Beckett says, dazedly.

“It seemed appropriate,” Castle says curtly.

“Wow. More than a week without a phone? Wow.” She looks at him. “You must have been really mad.” He just nods. “Okay. I finish at six,” she repeats. “I’ll see you both at Think Coffee. Usual, please, if you’re there first?”

“Sure.” Castle glances around. The other cops are hard at work. O’Leary and Ryan look up, notice him, and waggle fingers in a casual wave. Espo looks up, notices him, and forces a smile that doesn’t really indicate any happiness. It’s also not hostile, which is a considerable improvement, he supposes.

“What’s with Espo?” he asks, not entirely innocently. He hasn’t forgotten that Beckett had cut the call after saying that she couldn’t – couldn’t deal with the main issue, that was – while coping with Alexis’s apologies – and Espo’s got his head in his ass.

“We had a chat,” Beckett bites off. Not something she wants to discuss, by the sounds of it.

“Oh. Um. Is anything interesting going on?”

“Still chasing down loose ends. Paperwork and harassing labs. Nothing much more than that. We’re pretty much there, but I don’t want any of these guys to get off on a technical point. And,” she says more loudly, with a grin, “O’Leary needs to go back to his own shop. We’ve run out of elephants to feed him.”

“We keep a herd in the Park just for me,” O’Leary drawls. “My shop don’t like me when I’m hungry.”

Everyone laughs, even Agent Avery, who has appeared.

“Detective Beckett, if you go along to this address” – he hands over a piece of paper – “they’ll take out the transmitter chip.”

“Good. Thanks.”

“Aw,” Castle whines, “I wanted it to stay in. That way I’d always be able to find you.”

“Not that that’s creepy at all,” she says, and skedaddles. The sooner that chip is out the happier she will be.
Has no easy explanation

Chip out, and consequently very sore of arm now the anaesthetic has worn off, Beckett makes her way towards Think Coffee at the end of the day, wishing she’d never agreed to it. She hasn’t had a single non-professional word from Esposito all day since their little chat early on. It’s a source of stress she doesn’t need, when she knows that the next period will be rather more stressful. Espo’s silence is worrying, even if she knows she had to do it.

She knows she has to do this, too. She is an adult, and she can accept Alexis’s apology with grace, civility and understanding.

And then she can go home and punch hell out of a pillow, because she is actually pretty pissed with Alexis’s behaviour, but saying so isn’t going to help anything with anyone. She’s mad because she’d thought that Alexis was a really good kid, who’d done really good work on the civics project week; and then she’d found that Alexis, far from liking her as she had thought – hoped? – disliked her. If she hadn’t, then Meredith’s poison would have failed to have an effect. Really mature, Kate. Feeling rejected by your not-even boyfriend’s teen? Grow up. Just be civil, and get through it. Punch your cheap pillows, and move on.

Castle and Alexis are already at a small table. Alexis looks hangdog, Castle tense. Beckett pulls on a professional poker face, notes the third cup on the table, and strides over.

“Hey,” she says neutrally. Both of them jump.

“Hey, Beckett,” Castle manages. Alexis has the frozen, glassy stare of a rabbit faced by a fox.

Beckett sits down opposite the Castles. “Thanks for getting me coffee,” she says generally.

“You’re welcome,” Castle says, formally, after which nobody says anything. Alexis fiddles with a thread on her top, then with the strap of her purse, then with the thread again. Castle twirls his cup back and forth. Beckett sips her coffee.

By the fourth sip it’s more of a gulp. Beckett is beginning to wonder whose idea apologising actually was, since it’s pretty clear that Alexis isn’t managing to say anything. Amazingly, Castle seems to have no idea what to do, and is acquiring the same rabbit-versus-fox expression which his daughter is displaying.

Beckett is seriously contemplating making her excuses and leaving, as the suffocating lack of any communication swallows them up, when Alexis gulps, looks up – and then departs the table at speed in the direction of the restrooms with what sounds like a choked-off sob.

“That wasn’t the plan.” His words drop heavily.

“No.”

“She said she wanted to apologise,” he adds, as if Beckett might think he’d planned this fiasco.

“Yes.”

“I don’t know what to do. It’s up to Alexis but if she doesn’t want to or can’t apologise then there’s no point you staying. She said she would,” Castle insists, again.

“You can’t make her.”
“I didn’t. This was her idea.”

“Well, you can’t go and pull her out of the women’s restroom.”

Castle’s face lights up. “I can’t. You can, though. You could go and get her and maybe she’d talk to you in there without me listening in.”

“Huh? You want me to go and accost your daughter, who doesn’t like me, just because you think she’ll actually speak to me without you there?”

Castle stares at her, open-mouthed. “Where’d you get that idea?” Beckett is equally confused. “That Alexis doesn’t like you?”

“When someone does their best to ensure you feel that uncomfortable and move out immediately, it usually means they don’t like you.”

“Oh. But I explained. It was all Meredith making her feel like that.”

“If there hadn’t been something else she wouldn’t have listened to your ex, she’d have talked to you. There is something else, and you’re not telling me it.”

“There isn’t. She liked you just fine till Meredith started meddling.”

“I don’t believe” –

“I did,” sniffles into the incipient argument.

Both adults whip round. Alexis’s eyes match her flaming hair and cheeks.

“Dad spent the whole summer just writing and editing and not doing anything dumb and not at the Twelfth and you never came by so I thought it was just about the character and okay you were nice and all but I didn’t need to worry about it because you weren’t chasing Dad around and he wasn’t chasing you any more but anyway before last summer it just looked like one of his quick crushes and not real at all” – Castle emits a strangled squeak – “and then Paula wanted that Cosmo shoot and Dad insisted on doing it in the precinct and he wanted to trail round after you again and you didn’t throw him out and Mom saw the photos and the article and she just kept dropping hints and little things and she said you were luring him back by playing hard to get” – Castle gapes – “and Mom kept dripping poison about how I’d have a new Mom” – Beckett gasps – “and how I’d really have to make an effort to live up to your example” – another gasp – “and then you got me that civics week project.” Alexis finally stops for a breath. Breath has certainly been knocked out of Beckett. She can’t muster a single coherent syllable, let alone a thought.

“And I really thought it would be okay but everyone kept telling me how lucky I was that you’d got me it and how great it was that I knew you and how you were such a great role model and all the things you’d done and I hadn’t done anything and I could never do any of the things you did and I was stuck down in Archives and Mom kept saying that she was so pleased I wasn’t out with you and Dad and getting into danger and it just made it feel like it was totally unimportant and make-work and pushing me out and Dad was spending all his time totally following you and it didn’t matter before but now it did and it just got worse and worse and then he brought you home after you got blown up and I was jealous!” she sobs. “It looked like Dad was moving you in and he
totally wouldn’t pay any attention to me or Grams and Mom said that you’d be married and it looked just like it and I was so jealous and how was Dad ever going to love me when you could do everything and be a hero too?”

She dissolves into shuddering sobs.

Beckett has long given up any attempts to interject, and indeed has given up anything other than sitting and staring blankly at the light-speed outpouring of suppressed emotion and complete idiocy. Alexis is clearly her father’s daughter, and has inherited his ability to construct a conspiracy theory from nothing at all – except, of course, her mother’s malice and venom.

“I’m sorry,” she wails. Castle puts a paternal arm around his daughter, and applies his best pleading look to Beckett.

“Accepted,” Beckett says quietly.

“That’s it? Aren’t you angry? How can you not hate me? I hate myself!” Alexis’s voice rises again, till Castle pats her shoulder.

“I’m not angry. I don’t hate you.” Both of which are just about true. She’s not angry because she’s just about drowning in the overblown emotions of teenage angst and idiocy. She can’t face any more emotion of any sort whatsoever. “You’ve apologised. Let’s move on. Forget about it.” She sips her coffee, holding composure and not indicating in the slightest that she is absolutely desperate to leave. Alexis is sniffling. Castle is silent. Beckett continues to sip her coffee.

“How can’t you be angry?”

“You were manipulated by your mother. Maybe you should have talked to your dad but I’m not going to blame you for being a pawn in someone else’s game,” Beckett says: but she doesn’t meet Castle’s gaze, because Alexis is sixteen, dammit, and she should know that she’s first, last and foremost in her father’s life. She can feel a strong desire rising in her throat to rip into Alexis for her sheer stupidity in ever believing that anyone could take her place in Castle’s love, and rams it firmly down again. No more emotions are needed to complicate this evening.

“I have to go.” She stands up.

“But” – Castle emits – “I thought you’d” -

“I have to go now. I have some things to do,” Beckett forces out. She’s done it. She just needs some time to regroup. Chill out, maybe with some yoga. Beat hell out her pillow so she doesn’t tell Alexis exactly how much she hurt her and screwed up the possibility of a relationship between herself and Castle. Maybe if they’d had one she wouldn’t have this other problem because they’d have had something solid. She winces internally. She needs to get out before she says something or does something that messes this whole thing up again.

“See you tomorrow, Castle. Night, Alexis.”

She swings out of the coffee bar just as she’d swing out of the precinct. She doesn’t start to hurry until she’s out of sight of the windows, and then she moves. She can’t bear to run any risk that the Castles come after her.

She’s home half an hour later, strips and showers and yet again stays under scalding water for as long as she can, trying to wash away the day. When she’s done, she can’t be bothered to order a meal: finds some not-quite-stale bread and cheese, and unenthusiastically makes herself a grilled cheese sandwich of which she eats something less than half. She doesn’t do any yoga, either. She
can’t face the fact that she still hasn’t replaced her mat.

She puts herself to bed, and reads. Some time later, she notices a text which clearly arrived while she was showering.

*Are you okay? RC.*

She sends back *Yes. Good night.*

Not half a minute later, the phone rings.

Both Castles regard Beckett’s departure with confusion: in Alexis’s case, mixed with miserable paranoia and in Castle’s with worry.

“See? She hates me whatever she says in front of you. She’ll never want to speak to me again.”

“That’s pretty much what she thinks about you, with far better reason,” Castle points out. “Beckett came here, because you said you wanted to apologise, and accepted it. She hasn’t done anything to you and frankly, Alexis, her leaving most likely isn’t about you. She’s had a rough case, she got put in hospital, and she wants time to recover now it’s done. Likely she’ll never think about this whole episode again.”

“But she’ll never respect me.”

“Alexis, stop it. You made a mistake, you’ve apologised, Beckett has accepted it. Don’t blow this up into anything more. Next time, don’t take what your mom says for gospel.” He smiles, though it feels a little forced. “Let’s go home and have dinner, and then you can get your phone back and we can all go back to normal.”

“But” –

“Alexis, *enough.* Mistakes have consequences, and you’re lucky that Beckett wants to move on without holding a grudge.” He hopes. “Take it in the spirit she meant it and stop trying to make it into an even bigger deal.”

His effort to restore some sort of harmony with Alexis doesn’t stop Castle’s worry about Beckett’s feelings. Alexis hadn’t noticed, but he’d seen the tight lines around her eyes and mouth, the pale pinch of her lips. She’d accepted Alexis’s apology, sure, and even softened the blow, but she’d heard it out and then run at the first opportunity, which indicates either that she doesn’t believe Alexis – which would be ghastly – or that she’s left before she says what she really thinks, which is also pretty appalling, because the only reason of which he can think for *that* is that she is genuinely angry with her.

Quite a lot later, Castle manages to send Beckett a text.

Most of the intervening time has been spent calming Alexis and *not* succumbing to the temptation to tell his daughter that she brought the whole mess on herself by not talking to him right at the beginning; and that if Beckett doesn’t like her that will be Alexis’s own fault for behaving in a very underhand and malicious way which wouldn’t have been justified even if Beckett had been Cruella De Ville. He gets where Alexis had come from, but – well, he’d expected far better from his normally kind and empathetic daughter, and he’s been pretty disappointed in both her behaviour and in his own in not noticing what had been going on. Taking out his own annoyance and guilt at himself on Alexis is unfair. They all need to move on.
He messes around for a while, has a small amount of whiskey, which helps; considers a larger amount of whiskey, which wouldn’t help and would eventually give him a hangover which would be even less helpful; and wonders whether Beckett has received his text at all. Instead of pestering her, though, he reads the news sites, despairs at the state of the world, and reads his fan sites instead, which always makes him feel good and boosts his spirits and ego.

Finally, his phone beeps with a text from Beckett. He reads it, disbelieves it on general principles, and dials.

“Hey,” he says.

“Hey.”

He can hear the small indications of stress and I’m not in the mood to talk in Beckett’s voice, and ignores them.

“Thanks for letting Alexis apologise.”

“It’s fine.” Ah. The key word. It’s not fine. “Let’s all just forget it ever happened.” How about telling me what you really think? “I’m really tired. Could be the anaesthetic from earlier.” Very carefully not lying there, Beckett. Could be. Could be lots of things. Could be that you didn’t sleep last night; could be that you had a very unpleasant discussion with Espo which you aren’t telling me about; could be that you’re really angry with Alexis and aren’t telling me about that either. Could be is such a useful evasion.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. If I’d thought they had to cut it out and glue me together I’d have thought twice.”

“Glue? Not stitches?”

“Glue. I don’t need to look like a zombie. I leave that to Ryan after a heavy night of three beers.”

Castle snickers evilly. “Mean.”

“But true.”

“Are you okay, though?”

“Sure. It was all done in five minutes. It’s a bit sore now.”

“That wasn’t what I meant. You left pretty quickly.”

“We were done. And like I said, I’m tired, and my arm hurts. Agent Avery can take his dinosaur injection kit and eat it,” she adds viciously.

“Are you sure you’re okay? You’re not angry with Alexis?”

“It’s done. Can we just all get past it?”

That’s another evasion, Beckett. “It’s okay if you are. I was.”

“I’m tired. Leave it. I don’t want to think about it any more. It’s fine.”

More evasions. Castle is not happy about all these evasions, but Beckett is, in fact, yawning and if he wants another fight he’s going the right way about it.
“Okay. Till tomorrow, Beckett.”

“Night.”

Castle puts the phone down and wonders why on earth he thought he’d find anything out late at night by phone.

At the other end of Manhattan, Beckett puts the phone down and wishes that Castle hadn’t rung, because now she’s very conscious that he isn’t there and that they’re skirting the edge of difficult issues and not talking openly and… all the things that screwed it up before, every single time. But she is just too tired and she doesn’t have the headspace to deal with any of it tonight.

She falls hard into sleep, which affords her no real rest and certainly no insight, and is dragged from slumber by her alarm, thick-headed and logy.

The bullpen is, thankfully, quiet, which means that nobody notices that she’s on her third coffee before the rest of the team arrive. It helps. Esposito clumps in, and arranges himself at his desk without more than a grunted **Yo Beckett**, which hardly encourages her to believe that he’s going to be any more friendly than he was yesterday.

She is therefore entirely blindsided when Esposito sidles over to her desk. “Er, Beckett?”

“Yeah?”

“Er… I got thinkin’. Um… you were right. I didn’t realise. I’ll try’n not… Yeah. Well. You get what I mean. We good?” Inarticulacy doesn’t stop Beckett following his thoughts: her heart lifting with each word.

“We’re good.” She grins. “But the next time you pull that trick I’ll shoot you so full of holes you’ll be turned into a colander.”

Esposito makes an *I-got-it* gesture and sidles back to his desk: both of them a great deal happier.

The change in mood is obvious to Ryan and O’Leary almost as soon as they arrive. It even spreads to agents Shaw and Avery, and Montgomery, tentatively poking his head out of his office like a wise old tortoise, smiles to himself and declines to interfere. The team seems to be back in its normal state. He does wonder if he should push to get O’Leary transferred in, but then thinks better of it. Four is a good number for a team: five is too many. And Castle fits, so Montgomery’ll not rock the boat. Besides, O’Leary up against Espo is a little more edgy than Montgomery’s willing to handle. He goes back into his office and puts in a friendly call to Captain Calish at Central Park, thanking him for the use of O’Leary, noting that they’ve closed both their cases, and letting him know that O’Leary will be back in his own shop in the next day or two, if that’s okay? Which of course it is.

“Detective O’Leary?” Montgomery summons the mountain to come to Mohammed.

“Sir?”

“Time for you to get back to your own shop. Finish up any loose ends, but your Captain would like you back.”

“Yessir,” O’Leary rumbles. He’s none too unhappy with that. The Twelfth, he has discovered, is a very unrestful place. Sure, they get some really fun cases, but boy oh boy, the undercurrents are troublesome. He’ll stick to Central Park. The closest they get to weird is the constant reports of two
big black panthers, which is obviously nonsense. Some guys should stop smoking the funny cigarettes.
More paperwork doesn’t make the day pass faster, and Castle, wandering in, depositing coffee and depositing himself in his usual chair, finds that it also doesn’t elicit any useful answers. Beckett doesn’t look much better than she had yesterday, and she is, if that were possible, even less communicative. When he’s turned down for a lunchtime walk in the park, though, he evolves a better plan.

“I don’t wanna watch you do paperwork all day,” he whines. “It’s boring.”

“Yep. You don’t have to. Surely you’re due to hand in some chapters?”

“You make it sound like a homework deadline,” Castle complains. “Creativity can’t be rushed.”

Beckett lifts a cynical eyebrow. “Aren’t you? You’re always behind schedule.”

“I do my best writing under pressure. Deadlines aren’t important.”

“Contradictory. If your best writing is under pressure you need more deadlines, not fewer.”

Castle grumps. Then he beams. “Okay. I’ll do you a deal. I’ll go home and write and not sit here and whine if you promise I can come for dinner tonight – you don’t have to cook: your favourite takeout menu will do. I’ll bring dessert.”

Beckett regards him with a sceptical glare and a sardonic twist to her mouth. It’s perfectly plain that she’s seen right through him. He expects a flat refusal. After all, she hasn’t been willing to talk these last couple of days.

“Okay,” she says, much to his astonishment. “Sevenish. Chocolate dessert, please, since you’re inviting yourself to dinner.”

“I’ll even bring whipped cream,” he offers, and waggles his eyebrows villainously. When her hand touches her stapler, he flees.

His study is quiet, and soothing, and conducive to writing, much to Castle’s surprise. Maybe the harmony of his loft is restored, after yesterday. Certainly the miasma of hostility and misery has dispersed.

The aura of astonishment has not dispersed. He is dead certain sure that Beckett knew that he wanted a discussion, and he’s also dead certain sure that she knows exactly what he wants to discuss – and she still agreed to him visiting. They never talk. They never have talked – except now. Because they have talked: once in bed, and once in a hospital room, both in the last week. So maybe their talking is becoming a thing. Or more accurately: it has a faint hope of becoming a thing.

He turns to his laptop with a sense of hope and happiness which has been lacking for weeks – in fact, since he’d brought Beckett home after her old apartment blew up – and is shortly completely lost in inspiration and story.

He only rises out of the fog of words when his fingers cramp and he realises his back hurts. He stretches mightily, creaking all his vertebrae, and discovers it to be long after five. He also realises that he hasn’t purchased any chocolate dessert or whipped cream, and since Beckett’s addiction to chocolate will probably result in life-threatening consequences if he doesn’t arrive with his
promised delights, he’d better leave his writing and get himself organised. He only manages it, though, because he’s reached a natural pause-point, and the next part will be better if he lets it ferment in the back of his head for a while. (Procrastinate is such an unpleasant word, he thinks.)

He tells his mother, languishing on the couch in an attitude suggestive of Miss Hannigan after the whiskey – he checks her glass: she’s never usually keen on whiskey but who knows what Martha Rodgers may do in pursuit of a part and the perfect way to act; but it looks like white wine – that he’s going out, declines to be baited into revealing his destination, and departs.

A mouth-watering excursion through City Bakery on his way to the Upper West Side (along with a short stop-off at a much more standard store for the whipped cream) results in a chocolate dessert to make the angels sing: not that he intends sharing it with any angels. He’s not-so secretly hoping that Beckett might feel inclined to be a little less than angelic, until he remembers exactly why she might not, which definitely flattens his mood.

Even though he’s seen it a few times, now, Beckett’s apartment is still shockingly bare. However, with evening sunlight streaming through the tall windows, lighting it up, Castle can see that in time it could be made attractive and inviting. In time.

That time is not now.

On the other hand, there are two plates visible, and a selection of takeout menus, and Beckett’s eyes light up ravenously at the sight of the bakery box and cream.

“Where shall I put it?” he asks.

“Cream in the fridge, and cake here on the counter. What did you get?”

“Chocolate. With added chocolate. I know your taste in cakes and desserts, Beckett. You’re never knowingly under-chocolated.”

“Is that a word?”

“Yep,” Castle says unanswerably.

“What do you want?” She changes the subject to the menus, and pushes a pile at him. Not much furniture, not much else, but enough takeout menus to supply the whole of Manhattan. Thai is quickly ordered, arrives, and is quickly eaten, possibly because Beckett is regarding dessert with a predatory eye which quickly becomes a predatory fork.

“Nice,” she says contentedly, when dinner is done. During said dinner, there has been no serious discussion at all: in fact, Castle has very carefully stuck to the spices used in Thai cooking and the various bakeries at which excellent desserts (chocolate and otherwise) may be obtained. Now, however, dinner is definitely done, and while coffee can be – and is – made, conversation has died.

Beckett brings both coffees back to the couch and sits: tense and stiff. “We need to talk,” she says: but the words aren’t harsh or confrontational; instead they’re soft and quiet; freighted with unhappiness and tinged with almost-fear.

“Yes,” he agrees, smiling. “We managed to talk last week, though, and the world didn’t end, but… come here?” he asks, almost shyly, scared to press her to contact when half the problem is her fear of the physical, after the weekend.

She hesitates, as if she’s making a decision – please God she isn’t steeling herself – and moves slightly towards him, into his softly waiting arm. For another instant, she’s still rigid.
And then she relaxes into him and curls against him and lays her head on his shoulder; and he can encircle her in unpressured comfort and know that it’s all going to be okay: she’s come to him and tucked in and not, not not not, been tense and stressed and unhappy. She inhales softly against him, as if she’s breathing him in, and her arm curls round his chest in turn.

“I couldn’t deal with it last night,” she says. “One thing too many, all at once.”

“Mm?” he encourages.

“Espo being dumb and Alexis… and the rest. It was too much.” His fingers pet, barely touching her.

“Wanna tell me about Espo?”

“It’s fixed. But I had to really lay it on the line. Not fun. I don’t need him to protect me.”

Castle doesn’t comment – anything he says may be taken down and used against him later. He knows where this has come from, and where it’s gone, without anything more. He’ll save commentary for matters upon which he needs to comment, and that doesn’t include team management.

“He’s got his head out of his ass about you, anyway,” she adds, and he chokes on his coffee.

“Uh… good?”

“Yep.”

She relapses into silence, but stays closely tucked in. Castle allows her to wait, and maybe she’ll talk in her own time. After a shortish while, though, she hasn’t said anything further, simply stayed curled in: no more than that platonic contact.

“Um…” he starts, “um… are you angry with Alexis? You left pretty fast last night and…um …I know you said to her you weren’t but I thought you might be more upset than you let her know and I’m really grateful you didn’t lay into her because honestly you could’ve.”

Beckett flinches in the loose curve of his arm.

“You are. Upset. Or angry.” She makes a small move, which Castle forestalls. “Look, I was really angry too. But can we just get it out in the open between us? I’m not going to discuss you with Alexis or her with you: I just don’t want us to have secrets.”

There is an unhappy pause.

“I thought it was all about to go right, and your ex manipulated Alexis into messing it all up,” she forces out. “But she” – Castle translates that as Alexis – “should have known that you wouldn’t have screwed her up like that whatever she thought of me. Which,” she adds bitterly, “was that I’d just be another conquest.”

“You’re not,” Castle says very firmly. “Never that, Beckett. Never that.” He holds her tighter, as she retreats into herself. “Stay here.” She doesn’t try to escape, though she’s less curled in than a moment ago. “It’s okay if you’re angry. Really.” She’s closed off: he thinks she’s – oh. Of course she’s worried, or scared to say what she thinks, because she knows that Alexis comes first. What she doesn’t know is that that doesn’t mean that Alexis gets a free pass to screw up or behave badly, but that’s because Alexis just has, and he didn’t notice until after it had set the waves rippling outwards. He can’t even take the previous option, and kiss hell out of her, because that’s off the
till Beckett makes a move. All he has are words, and honesty, and hope: and no way to show honesty through the passion that doesn’t lie.

“Look, I’m angry with Alexis too. She should never have believed Meredith and she should never have treated you like that and just maybe we’d not be here now if she hadn’t because I really hoped — I told you — I hoped that if you were in the loft we might work it out .”

“If Meredith hadn’t made sure that Alexis fucked everything up from moment one, you mean. Yeah. And maybe if that had happened I wouldn’t be so messed up about the op either,” Beckett says with acid bitterness. “We might have had something solid. Instead I had to use something that should have been a start to get me through Friday and I hate that I did it because it’s tainted it and it shouldn’t be like that.”

“You said. You said on Saturday in the hospital, but Beckett, I hate what that op did to us too. I hate that it was just so hot even though you hated it and I knew you did. And you hate that you got yourself through it and did it by thinking about us. We have to get past it and forgive ourselves.” He stops, and catches her liquid gaze, his blue eyes unguarded. “Together, Beckett. Just let me hold you now. Nothing else, as long as you want. We had to do it to put them away, and now we can do this to put us back together.”

She doesn’t drop her eyes, but fluid puddles in them and she turns into his shoulder again, her arm slipping back around his chest. He cossets her more closely: her own shoulders are quivering but his vision is blurring too.

“Don’t go,” she whispers. “Don’t let go.”

He simply lays his cheek on her hair, and holds on, and lets her soften into him: lean against his broad frame and take comfort. He hadn’t thought that she might feel as guilty as he about Friday’s actions; that she might need the same reassurance as he does.

“I won’t go,” he confirms. “I won’t go anywhere while you want me here.”

She makes a tiny, unhappy noise, and burrows deeper into his neck. Without thinking, he swings her round so that her legs are across his lap, and keeps her yet closer, wrapped into his frame. There is another hitch, not exactly resistance but not assistance either: he doesn’t try to so much as drop a kiss on her hair; simply doesn’t let go. Once more, after a moment, she softens against him, and herself doesn’t let go. They stay like that for some time.

“What do you want?” Castle eventually murmurs into Beckett’s hair. She’s very quiet and still.

“Stay.” It’s barely audible. “Just stay.”

“Okay.”

There is another long gap in which nothing happens and no-one speaks or moves. Both of them are drifting, half asleep.

“It’s late,” he murmurs. “Still stay?”

“Yes.”

“Bedtime.” He shakes himself into mostly-wakefulness, and slides her off his knee on to the couch beside him. She looks lost, for a second, until his arm tightens fractionally and she realises he’s still in contact. “You want the bathroom first?”
“Yes,” she drags: a tiny tension in the muscles round her eyes.

“C’mon, then. I need my beauty sleep.”

She manages a small, disapproving grimace, before standing and taking possession of the bathroom. Castle tidily arranges his socks in his shoes and doesn’t undress further, though he certainly intends to sleep clad only in his boxers. He has a theory, which is that Beckett is still – unsurprisingly – having nightmares, and that the solution to those nightmares might just turn out to be curling up to him. He’s basing this solely on Saturday night, when he’d managed to soothe her through her fractured sleep.

When she returns, washed and cleansed and pale of face, swathed in a soft blue robe, she carries an air of fragility. Castle fails to comment on this, instead taking her place and performing a somewhat abbreviated night time routine of his own. When he re-enters the bedroom, Beckett is already under the bedcovers, eyes closed, but very unlikely to be asleep. He undresses out of her line of sight, and cautiously slides in beside her, finding her hand and curling his fingers hesitantly around hers; an undemanding contact which leaves everything up to her.

Her hand locks into his fingers, and suddenly she turns to him and burrows into his side: awkward and tense; a sharp check on finding skin not fabric and his heart falls; but she doesn’t recoil. He detaches his fingers from hers, uncomfortably positioned after her movement, and, still so horribly cautiously, brings his arm around her, hand on her waist, resting on her sleep tee.

“It’s all spoiled,” she whispers miserably. “We never had anything and now we still don’t.”

Castle clamps down on his instant response of don’t be dumb, Beckett in favour of thinking before he says anything.

“We do have something,” he rumbles in a soft baritone, completely confident. “We’re here, together. That’s a lot more of something than a month ago. I’ve got you, and I’m not letting go.”

Beckett shifts slightly. “A month ago we were hardly speaking.” His arms close around her. “Now you’re tucked up next to me and sure there are some things we need to work out but they’re outside of us. It’s not us fighting, it’s getting over a bad case.” She shifts again, and there’s a small dampness on his chest.

“But I can’t…” she says hopelessly.

“It’s only been five days. Of course you can’t. We don’t have to, either. I didn’t stay for that.”

“I know,” she whispers, and a weight lifts. He realises he’s rubbing gentle circles over her back, but doesn’t stop.

“I stayed because you asked me to. Whatever you need, because we’re in this together.” He has a thought. “This – just being close and cuddling – is a big part of it. Just that you can be close and be touched at all is enough.”

“I don’t want just cuddled. I want what we nearly had.”

Castle doesn’t say anything to that. He wants what they’d nearly had too. “When you think you’re ready. Until then, just stay by me.” Broad hands span her knotted back. His circling movements continue. “Just relax. I’ve got you.” He discovers more dampness spattering his skin. “We can fix this. You’re in bed with me and if there was a really big issue you wouldn’t be in my arms at all let alone in bed.” He smiles lazily, though it takes some considerable effort. “I like you in my arms in bed.”
An indistinguishable mutter emanates miserably from below his chin.

“Come here,” he entices. “Come here and be easy,” and he tugs gently till Beckett’s arranged comfortably against his chest and within his arms: washed out and fragile; a little too light for her height. He rubs gentle circles into her back until heaviness and soft breathing indicate sleep, and then he follows.

In the faint light of almost-morning, he discovers that he hasn’t woken, or been woken; and that Beckett is still precisely where she should be, curled against him: albeit her back is turned to him, his arm is still around her. Fairly quickly, he discovers that his fingers have gone to sleep, which is unpleasant. He consults his watch, and discovers that it is not quite five, so he shouldn’t be awake at all. He settles back down, exchanges arms so that his fingers don’t fall off but he’s still in contact with Beckett, and closes his eyes again.

Beckett opens her eyes several minutes before her alarm will go off and realises with considerable surprise and much more delight that she has slept properly – or if she did have nightmares, they didn’t wake her and she has no memory of them. She instantly and correctly attributes that to the solid presence beside her, still snoozing; and, better rested and therefore capable of thinking without the fog of brain-deadening tiredness and unhappiness of the previous night, applies some intelligence to the instant problem.

Castle had more or less said if there was a big issue you wouldn’t touch me. True. She’s seen victims who’ve been sexually assaulted, and while there’s a considerable range of reactions, the majority of them haven’t shown their major responses to the trauma to be snuggling in bed with someone with whom they’ve barely had a relationship – no matter the long history – for a moment. That’s been confined to very understanding partners. (Yes, well, um. Castle surely seems to be that. But still, they’d barely sorted themselves out before this hit them.) And while she was assaulted, and rape was threatened, she’d gone in of her own volition and in pursuit of two criminals, with the full weight of the NYPD and the FBI behind her and the team protecting her.

So what’s she really freaked about? It’s not the end of the op, no way. That certainly wasn’t fun, but... she’s been hurt on the job before, and had the medical costs and records to prove it. It’s the beginning. It’s having to pretend she liked the leering, and the touching, and the need to pretend to be nothing but a living sex toy, there simply to provide gratification. It’s having to ram down her own feelings and be meek and mild and submissive.

It’s having to put up with bad treatment, when her whole life is about making sure that those doing the treating badly get what they deserve. It’s being powerless, when generally she’s powerful.

And she’s freaked out because she’s mixed it all up with the angry, rough sex with Castle: who’s a big man who would, in other circumstances, be capable of enforcing his desire: of making her powerless. Yeah, sure. After a full frontal lobotomy and a total personality transfer. Sure it had been rough, but she’d been right there with it and he’d never turned it from that to an attempt at any more dominance than sheer physical size and the surrender involved in sex itself. But that had been who she is, as well. Safe in Castle’s arms and body, she could be herself. No acting, no pretending, no need to hide her personality or authority or strength: giving in to the bond between them is not giving up who she is.

The problem with the shoot is all about having had to surrender who she is, not entirely voluntarily: and that is simply not the same as only the night before, when they’d fought each other to a standstill and then he’d brought her to a wholly voluntary, welcomed surrender, as she had brought him there too.
She slaps off her alarm before it can sound, and pads through into the bathroom to shower and go through her morning routine. When she pads out again, she’s showered, made-up, and hair fixed; underwear on. Her clothes are in the closet, so that’s where she aims.

“Pretty,” Castle emits sleepily. When she spins, one hazy blue eye has made it to half-open, the other is still shut. His brain clearly hasn’t connected yet. “Why aren’t you here?”

“Work,” she points out. That receives a sleepy, adorable pout.

“Over-rated. C’mere.” He extricates a hand from the coverlet, extending it to her. “C’mon,” he entices, still nine-tenths dozing. “Please?”

She sits on the edge of the bed, still wrapped in the same blue robe of the previous evening. Castle heaves his sleepy self over towards her, and catches her round the middle. “Better,” he mumbles, and nuzzles his nose into her hip. His eyes close again.

She unpicks his fingers from their entanglement in the belt of her robe. “I need to go to work,” she enunciates. “You need to wake up.”

“Need to cuddle.”

Beckett regards him suspiciously. “No.” He pouts again. He’s rumpled and cute when he’s mostly-asleep. He snuggles around her: one arm creeping back around her middle, as if she might not notice. She taps it. “Wake up.”

“Don’ wanna.”

“Wake up,” she says very firmly.

His eyes spring open: for an instant there’s a flare of – something that isn’t simply lust, oh no – let’s call it appreciation, Kate – appreciation, and then mind and memory kicks in and it disappears, replaced by a pained hope that she can hardly bear to see.

“You’re up,” he says carefully.

“Yeah. Work.”

“Oh. Already?”

“Yes.”

“So you need to get up.” But entirely without her volition, one of her hands has migrated to his neck and is playing with his hair.

“I could lock up for you?”

Beckett thinks about that. “Okay.” He yips, as if he hadn’t expected it. She unwinds him and returns to looking in her closet for clothes. Those found, she closes its doors and lays them out – And freezes, staring at the clothes and Castle and Castle and the clothes and then she whips them all up and dashes into the bathroom and the door bangs shut.
Behind the closed door, she drops her clothes and collapses to sitting on the floor. That – wasn’t what she expected to happen. She’d just thought through the whole mess. Castle is not those men. She knows that. She breathes very deeply. I knew you hated it but it was just so hot and I hate myself flows through her head. Castle is not those men. Castle is as upset by the op as she is. She inhales slowly, exhales, inhales: repeat until her head is straight again.

She picks up the clothes and walks back out into the bedroom. She can do this. She gets dressed in her bedroom not in the bathroom (it’s far too small) and she can do this.

Castle is sitting on the edge of the bed, facing away from the bathroom and putting on his socks; slumped and heavy. He turns to her, dull-faced, as she drops the clothes on the bed. “I should go,” he says.

“No. It was me,” she says quickly. “I spooked. But you aren’t them.” She watches his expression clear. “We’re in this together. I dress in my bedroom and that isn’t going to change for two murderers and one groping dresser.”

“All of whom are in the cells,” Castle says. “‘Cause you put them there.”

“Yes,” she says viciously, “and they’re not putting me in a mental cell. Fuck them. Fuck that.” He blinks at her language. “They don’t get to win anything.” She exhales a long, harsh breath. “Turn around.” It’s a command. He obeys. “Right. I am going to dress and you are staying in here and watching while I do. Whatever happens.”

“Uh?”

Beckett collects up her nerve and drops her robe. Castle’s eyes widen, but he doesn’t make a sound. She picks up her tee top and wriggles into it. As soon as it’s on, she feels better. Less exposed. She pulls her pants on, and then sits down for her thin socks. Her knees aren’t entirely solid. That… had been harder than it should be.

Castle shuffles across the bed and ends up next to her. He doesn’t touch her, until she quite definitively moves into him, and even then he’s tentative. So is she. Her hand creeps over his, his arm barely around her; she leans fractionally on to his shoulder. She doesn’t say anything for a moment, as she regulates her breathing.

“Thanks,” she emits, and subsides wholly on to his arm and shoulder. With that almost-permission, his arm wraps closely around her and holds her tightly.

“That… that was a bit scary, Beckett. I thought…”

“Not you,” she bites. “It’s not you. He’s not taking this from me. Us.”

Castle, sensibly, says nothing.

“I need to get to work. Will you lock up?”

“Sure.”

She stands up and slips her feet into her heels, flicks a very light jacket out of the closet – and then turns back and leans down and plants a butterfly whisper-kiss over his cheek – and then leaves, rapidly: Castle staring after her with his fingers on the spot she’d bussed.

She’s really into this. She’s fighting for a them. Fighting herself, right now, but fighting for them. That’s his big bad badass Beckett: refusing to give in to anything at all. Especially, refusing to give
Much later, Castle appears at the Twelfth with bear claw and coffee, by which time Beckett is entirely over her ridiculous – to her – spooking and has long been tearing into the last loose ends. In fact, as Castle arrives she yips happily as she receives the final e-mail that she needs.

“Got them,” she snarls. “The last piece. Now Montgomery can fight it out with San Francisco for who gets to deal with them.”

“All done?”

“Wrapped up tighter than a mummy in the museum.” She stands up, a weight lifted from her shoulders. “Ryan, Espo, O’Leary?”

Yo meets yeah meets rumble.

“We’re done. We got them.”

The boys come bounding over; O’Leary takes two steps.

“We’re done?”

“Yep. Last piece just came in. All done. It’s the DA’s problem now.”

“Guess that means I can go home,” O’Leary vibrates, hopefully.

Beckett considers telling him that she’s asked Montgomery to steal him, and then notices the slight tension in Espo and Ryan. It wouldn’t be fair to do that. She’s fixed things, and she’s not going to break them again.

“Well, we ran out of elephants yesterday, so I guess so.”

“Elephants?” the boys say.

“Din’t you notice? That’s what they feed me. Elephants.” Everyone sniggers.

“Time for us to pack up and go home too,” Agent Shaw says from behind the mountainous mass. “Another good result. If you ever want a change of career, let me know.”

Beckett looks blankly at her.

“I’d even put up with the elephants,” she says, and everyone laughs. “You’re a good team.” Her eyes linger on Beckett, and angle to a conference room. As everyone disperses, Beckett trails after her.

“Yes?”

“Are you okay?” Shaw says bluntly. “We don’t much like collateral damage to other LEAs.”

“Yes,” Beckett replies equally bluntly, and then, under Shaw’s blistering eye, adds, “some fall out, but I’m dealing with it.”

“With Mr Castle.”

“None of your business how.”
Shaw smirks. “Profiler. So nice when I’m right.” She trips away, smugness in her gait. Beckett growls, and returns to her desk. She likes Shaw no better now than she had on Friday morning.

“How what?” Castle asks.

“Tidy up the papers for the DA, and wait for the next body to drop.”

“You think, Detective?”

Montgomery has oozed up to her desk, unnoticed.

“Sir?”

“You should have had at least one further day of medical leave. Reviewing the records of your team” – he turns and favours the boys with a Captainly stare – “you all have some leave due. All of you are to take three days and return on your normal shift pattern the day after.”

“Sir,” Beckett says, there being no point arguing.

“Detective O’Leary, thank you for your assistance. Captain Calish will no doubt deal with you appropriately.” Montgomery grins, mischievously. “I thought about asking for you to be transferred.”

“Sir?” O’Leary says very worriedly.

“But we’ve got nowhere to store the elephants.” The team collectively blushes.

“You heard that, sir?”

“Yes. Those elephants are gonna follow O’Leary wherever he goes, like Mary’s Little Lamb. Captain Calish heard it, too.” Montgomery oozes off again, smirking happily. He may have mentioned it to Calish, who had found it funny.

“Butterfly,” O’Leary growls, shivering the floor, “I am gonna shoot you!”

“That’s my line,” Beckett smirks. “I’ve been waiting for revenge for that nickname for years.”

Castle prudently steps out of the line of fire. Beckett and O’Leary trade barbs for a few moments, to the vocal appreciation of Ryan and Esposito. Eventually they run down, both laughing.

“I’ll get you,” O’Leary threatens in a window-vibrating bass.

“Nah. You need me to lend you my mascara when you run out.”

O’Leary belly-laughs. “Sure I do. Okay, I’m off back to my own shop. Missing the wide open spaces, y’know.” He grins. “Now you kids play nice with each other, you hear?”

He leaves to a chorus of complaint and raspberries.

Somewhere in the chaos, the agents have quietly departed. Life is back to normal. Everyone breathes a sigh of relief. This case has been…um…tricky. They’ve all found out things that they really didn’t want to know about themselves.

“Okay, quitting time,” Beckett says at the end of shift. “See you all in three days.”
“What’re you gonna do?”

“Sleep,” she says lightly. “Do my chores.”

Buy chairs and a table, and order a gun safe. Try and make her apartment into some sort of a home. She trails back to the Upper West Side, slowly, and looks around her empty space. Her list is on the small, cheap desk with its cheap plastic chair. She sits down, uncomfortably, and then gets up again, transferring to the more comfortable couch with her interminable list.

Table and chairs. Yes. Sunday’s flea market will be better than buying new. She looks around again. The evening light is streaming in through the tall windows, still unframed by curtains or blinds, but somehow it’s warmer: the wooden floor glows softly. She has a sudden burst of enthusiasm, and calls up her bank balance. A table and chairs, yes, and if she’s lucky, a small side table and even a lamp. But safety first: she researches carefully and orders a suitable gun safe, and is delighted that it is at a discount. Delivery will be the day after tomorrow.

She watches the way the light falls, and considers. If she asked her dad, she could get copies of some of the photos: replace the ones that burned. Hang them on the walls, rather than wait for tables or shelves which she can’t yet afford. It doesn’t have to be the same. She calls him, before she can forget, or think better of it. She continues to think. Time to try to turn this into a home, not a crash pad.

Maybe she’s happier about it because there’s a very faint trace of Castle-ness remaining, a slight scent on the pillows (okay, so she went and sniffed the fabric, but no-one else needs to know about that); a mug in the drainer where he’d clearly had a coffee before he left. Casually, as if he knew she wouldn’t mind (she doesn’t); as if they do this.

They do. They do this. And knowing that, she can try to make this into a home. The first step: a table and chairs. The second, a small party: her team, which includes Castle, and Lanie, and O’Leary. A housewarming.

She spends the rest of the evening plotting, broken up only by a rapid dinner and a confirmation from her father that he’ll have copies of the photos she wanted tomorrow. And then she goes to bed and cuddles the pillow that still smells faintly of Castle, and only has one nightmare. She deals with that by remembering their terrified faces as they went down to the cells, and dreams no more.

Beckett, off-duty by order, sleeps late. Very late. She finally pries her eyes open at well past nine, indeed, very close to ten, and although she makes a brief foray to the bathroom she then snuggles back into her cover and the pillow which smells comfortingly of Castle. She’d had softer pillows, before, but she’d had to prioritise, ruthlessly.

She thinks about the day. Nothing much to do, so she could do a bit of generalised window shopping: and then a bit of specific shopping for mugs and glasses; crockery sufficient for six not four. Nothing much. Clear her head, and think about… well, things. Specifically, six-foot-nearly-two with eyes of blue things; and more specifically, how to make sure that they get to where they’d almost been.

Well, there’s an easy way to try that.

*Want to come over for dinner tomorrow?* B, she taps out.

Halfway through her window shopping she gets a reply: *Can’t do dinner. After?* C.

*OK*, she sends back, and finishes her shopping, calls in on her dad and some time later leaves him,
bearing the replacement photos. Since she’ll be on her own for dinner, she buys some easy food, and then some cookies for later; and then, forcing herself to bravery, a bottle of white wine. She really does like white wine, and white wine spritzers, and she won’t be caged by others’ actions.

Castle, while wishing very much that he could simply accept Beckett’s dinner invitation on Saturday – oddly formal, that, but still, invitations are much better than no invitations or outright rejections – rather thinks that a family dinner of his own is indicated. Mostly, that’s to ensure that his mother and daughter are getting along again; partly, it’s to reassure Alexis that he’s not ignoring her. The last thing he needs is another bout of jealousy if it’s easy to avoid it.

And partly, he intends to tell both of his redheads that he will be spending a reasonable number of evenings with Beckett, and why it might take a little while for her to spend evenings with them, which is a conversation best constructed and indeed censored over dinner.

But still, his heart is lightened and happy that she’s asked him to come over. Fighting for them, he thinks. She hasn’t asked him over since before the previous apartment was blown up, and now she has.

His Saturday passes off surprisingly well. His mother is embarrassingly salacious, which is nothing new, but a good reason not to bring Beckett back; and Alexis is pleasantly supportive, at least while he can see or hear her. He’ll talk to his mother about Alexis’s true reactions later. She’s always been quick to admit her fault and punish herself, but he’s got her so wrong this time that he no longer trusts his instincts.

“Dad,” she says as he’s just about to leave. “Dad, um… I know you just said you wouldn’t bring Detective Beckett back here and she’s still working through the case but… um… I really wish you would so I can try to be like I should have been with her.” She throws her arms round him. “Please, Dad?”

“We’ll see,” he temporises. He has no idea how Beckett might react to that idea. More, he’s not introducing a new variable to this evening. There are enough variables around this evening already.

“See you” –

“Tomorrow,” Alexis says definitively.

“But pumpkin” –

“Tomorrow. Even if you come home, I’ll be asleep.” She lets go of him. “Go make Detective Beckett happy.”

“You want me to be a target? Suggesting she’ll shoot me is what makes her happy,” he says.

Alexis shoves him out of the door, snickering in a way he hasn’t heard for weeks.

He takes a cab uptown, rather than driving, and unwilling to wait for the car service. He realises he hasn’t brought anything, and stops off early to purchase chocolate, which is never wrong when dealing with Beckett.

He taps on the uninviting door, and is greeted with an inviting smile.

“Hey.”

“Hey. I brought some chocolate.”
Beckett’s eyes light up. “Thanks. I got some wine.”

“Yes, please.”

Beckett takes down two glasses from a cupboard, extracts the bottle from the fridge, and starts to open it. Shortly, there is the convivial noise of wine glugging from a bottle into glasses. Castle wanders over to the kitchen area to collect his drink, and not entirely incidentally to see if the provision of white wine also carries a certain air of defiance. He hasn’t forgotten Friday’s drink selection, and he’s pretty certain already that this evening has at least as much to do with Beckett bull-heading her way through whatever issues she thinks remain than a spur-of-the-moment social affair.

His conclusions seem to be confirmed a moment or two later, when she hasn’t taken a single sip of wine. She’s cupping the glass in both hands, and staring into the fluid.

“I like white wine,” she says, almost to herself, and raises her glass to her lips. A mouthful disappears. “That’s quite nice,” she adds. “I haven’t had this one before.”

“Proving a point?” Castle says, which he meant to keep inside his head. Beckett regards him with a raised eyebrow. “I didn’t say that out loud, did I?”

“Yes.” Which could mean either yes out loud or yes proving a point or indeed both. He takes refuge in his wine.

“I’m going to get a table and chairs tomorrow,” she says, after leaving a momentary silence in which Castle can contemplate the virtues of not articulating every thought he has. “Um…do you want to come too? You could,” she says very deliberately, “carry the table.”

Castle chokes on his wine. He’s instantly flung back to last Thursday’s argument. I only wanted to help, but you never need any help. So she’s giving him the chance to help. “Okay. But if I’m carrying a table, how are you going to manage chairs – how many chairs?”

Beckett sniggers. “They’ll go on a hired pick-up.”

Castle scowls theatrically. “So I carry a table while you drive a pick-up? Something’s wrong there.”

“You wanted to show off your muscles.”

“Not that far.”

Beckett snickers some more. “Gotcha.”

“Mean,” he says indignantly. “Very mean, Beckett. But because I am the bigger person I’ll still come to help you with your table and chairs.” As if he ever wouldn’t have, now that she’s letting him help. He recognises the olive branch.

She sips her wine, any small stresses around the drink now absent. “Thanks. Shouldn’t take too long.” Another sip. “I ordered a gun safe. It’ll be delivered tomorrow.”

“That sounds safer,” Castle says provocatively. “Sleeping with your gun is not safe.”

“It’s in the closet, not under my pillow.”

“Still not safe. Much better for you to sleep with something else. Me, for example.”
Becket splutters. Castle smirks. “Gotcha,” he says smugly. She growls and grumbles. Magically, the wine decreases as she does.

After a while, conversation has turned to the types of table and chairs Beckett might like, the relative benefits of various markets and shops, and then to the general décor of the apartment. The level of wine is slowly falling, the discussion is good-natured and gently humorous, and Castle gradually becomes aware that Beckett is very slightly – and sneakily – moving closer. He preserves an air of not noticing, being exceedingly interested in what she’s doing and exceedingly convinced that she’ll end up nestled in.

The question is, then, what happens after that?
For the love of a man

Castle’s surmises about nestling in are indeed correct, though said nestling takes longer than he would like to come about. (He would have been quite happy had it taken less than half a second from Beckett sitting down with her wine. It actually took quite a considerable number of minutes.)

But now he doesn’t know quite what to do. He certainly knows what he’d like to do. He also knows what he would have done at any point before last Friday, had she nestled in. But Friday changed a lot of things, and right now he doesn’t think that falling on Beckett, devouring her mouth and then taking her to bed is a good plan. At least, not if he initiates it. She could initiate it, he supposes, and then he simply needs to follow her lead. Which might be rather interesting. He assumes an innocent face, drapes a very loose arm around Beckett, and waits.

Waiting produces a slightly more definite snuggle in, and then a head on his shoulder. Castle tightens his arm a fraction, and draws random patterns on Beckett’s sleeve: mild encouragement to move closer and take another step. Sadly, she’s looking at her twining fingers in her lap.

“I want to,” she says bitterly. “I don’t want to have to think about it and plan it and work just to kiss you.”

Kiss him? Yes, definitely. To be encouraged. A flash of sheer brilliance sears Castle’s brain and, because he has no filters when it comes to sheer brilliance (or indeed anything else), falls straight out of his mouth.

“I have an idea,” Castle says.

“Yeah?”

“I do nothing at all.” She blinks at him, bemused. “You do whatever you feel like with me – except shooting or torture or pain,” he adds very quickly, “and I just sit here and let you. I don’t do anything. All the control is with you.”

She stares at him. “You what now?”

“You do what you want, and I let you.”

The noise that emerges is indescribably weird. Eventually it resolves into why?

“Because I always wanted to be a gorgeous woman’s sex toy,” Castle grins wickedly, “and now I get to be.” She boggles. “Think of the possibilities…. Just don’t hurt me. My safe word is still apples.”

She’s still staring, completely boggled. “Do nothing? But…”

“I don’t think it’s fair that the man should do all the work. Equality, Beckett. It’s entirely unfair that society expects that men should take the lead and initiate everything. I am a proud believer in women’s equality.”

He sits back and puts his hands primly in his lap, affecting an ingenuous demeanour. She continues to boggle: drinking her wine almost without noticing.

“But… but Thursday… and you said the shoot was hot… and… but…”
Castle fights his way through the thicket of conjunctive confusion. “You might not have noticed, but I’m a straight adult male. You in sexy underwear would be hot even if it was in the middle of the Arctic icefield. Yes, sure, it was hot but that’s only fun if you both like it and both want to play. And Thursday we were both really mad and you were fighting as much as I was. You can be very rough when you want to be,” he adds, even more primly.

Beckett appears unconvinced.

“Look, it’s up to you. I promise I’ll let you do what you like and tell me what you want me to do and nothing more.” He smiles lazily. “I’ll have just as much fun like that as any other way.”

Beckett regards Castle very carefully. He seems to be entirely sincere. In fact, he closely resembles a resting lion, happy to let everyone else do all the work and make him happy thereby. It just… doesn’t quite seem to fit with Thursday. Sure, they might both have been mad at each other and it just – well – exploded, but after that he’d certainly been pretty assertive, and he’d certainly enjoyed being so.

She’d enjoyed him being so. Then. And she had certainly intended to turn the tables on him. Then. But she had never had the chance, and now…

“I’ll even let you cuff me,” Castle says happily.


“Okay,” he agrees amiably. “Whatever you want.”

She thinks for a moment, finishing her wine, during which time Castle doesn’t touch her.

“Okay,” she eventually says. “We’ll try it.” But she doesn’t move, except for her tight hands twisting and the frown invading her brow.

Finally, she speaks. “I just want you to hold me,” she admits. “Just that.” Castle puts his arm back round her and observes with some well-hidden interest that Beckett then wiggles herself into a comfortable alignment and drops her head back on to his shoulder. As he had promised, he does precisely nothing more. Shortly, she tucks her feet up under her and leans closer.

By increments, and painfully slowly (for many reasons: Castle is definitely pained) she ends up on his lap with her face buried in his neck and a hand wrapped round his shoulder. He does no more than ensure his arm stays round her: not even joining it with the other arm. He’s some way into thinking that this was a bad idea, or at least an idea which is producing no progress whatsoever for Beckett. Cuddles have been managed at all stages since Friday, though nothing else has.

Which is when she cups a hand round his cheek, and entices his face around, and very, very tentatively kisses him, square on the lips. And then again, less tentatively. And then very untentatively indeed. He lets her raid as she pleases, and while he responds with considerable enthusiasm, he manages not to succumb to his own instincts and raid and ravage right back again; to keep his grip relatively loose and not to slide hands into her hair to position her head for him. She has to lead, until she very specifically tells him that she doesn’t want to.

She stops kissing him, which is not the plan, and snuggles in, which is reassuringly affectionate, and mumbles something, which might with a little translation become fuck them, I can do this. Which is both reassuring and appalling.

“Kiss me, Castle,” she says.
It’s not as if he’s ever going to turn that down, now is he? So he does, gently: soft lips and absolutely no devouring of her lush mouth. She opens up and invites him in with a nip on his lower lip, an advance and retreat of tongue, and her hands around his neck pulling his head to hers. A small amount of devouring seems indicated, so he kisses a little more deeply, alert to any resistance, of which there is yet none.

She pulls away. “Kiss me harder,” she says. “I’m not fragile. I won’t break. Just kiss me like you mean it.”

So he does. So she does. And while hands remain well-behaved, mouths and lips and tongues are not. They fight and mix and explore and move from mouth to skin and since she does Castle feels that he can too but she’s found the sweet spot on his neck first and all he can do is rasp deep in his throat below her mouth’s touch. Her lips play there for a while, but her hands don’t seek out his buttons, they don’t explore beyond his neck. All the time, her nose is by his skin, breathing him in, he thinks, as she had before.

Finally she lifts off again, and rests in his arms, quiet and somehow eased.

“They had a different aftershave,” she blurs out. “Not yours.” Ah. So she was, knowingly or not, drawing in his scent. Her head nestles back into the crook of his neck. “Please hold me?” He wraps her tightly into his arms, hearing the need and desperation to get back to where they’d nearly been.

“I’ve got you,” he rumbles happily. “Just like you asked me. Promise I won’t change my cologne. Anyway, it’s perfectly blended to suit me.” He smirks smugly. “No-one else has the particular combination of pheromones that makes it so good.”

“Are you saying that you have a unique aftershave?”

“Um… no. Just that it wouldn’t smell as good on anyone else.”

“Have you tested that?”

“Um… no. I don’t need to.”

“I could,” she lilts. Castle growls. His brain has no part in that noise. “Don’t you like that idea?”

“Not much,” he replies mildly, understating the case by several orders of magnitude. He can feel her smirk against his skin. “Anyway, you like it on me. So why be disappointed elsewhere?” Now he can feel her eyes rolling. With every piece of intentional, flirtatious arrogance she’s relaxing into their normal edged snark, banter and spark.

“I might not be,” she says provocatively. “Who knows, it might suit O’Leary.”

Castle snickers. “Could be interesting,” he says, “for me. It wouldn’t help you at all.”

Beckett growls. “O’Leary isn’t allowed to try to poach my boyfriends.”

“Is that what I am?” Castle asks even more provocatively than she had. She glurs. Clearly that had been a wholly unintentional admission. Which, of course, makes it very likely to be true. Something is unintelligibly mumbled into his neck. “I’ll take that as a yes.”

She sighs.

“What’s wrong?”
“Normally boyfriend equals more than barely managed a kiss. At least if you’re over fifteen.”

“When I was fifteen I managed a lot more than kisses,” Castle says smugly, without engaging brain at all. “Ow!”

“These days you’d be arrested and put on the sex offenders’ register.”

“Nuh-uh.”

“You would.”

“Wouldn’t. She was over eighteen.”

“I don’t wanna know.”

“Anyway,” Castle says, attempting to retrieve his feet from his throat, “I’m your boyfriend. You said so. And I like kisses. Specifically, I like kissing you. I’m quite happy to kiss you lots.”

Her eyes are rolling, he can tell. Something about the different pattern of her breathing when she rolls her eyes – and that’s not creepy at all, is it? He might spend just a little too much time observing her.

Anyway, the important thing here is that she was kissing him, and she’s still tucked in, and it’s moving in the right direction. Okay, moving barely faster than a glacier, but moving.

Being surrounded by Castle and aroma-of-Castle is definitely very helpful to Beckett’s mood and inclinations. She is inclined to move a little further, but she is terrified of spooking, which would be upsetting for both of them. She doesn’t want Castle upset by her hang-ups: and since everything she did was of her own volition it’s ridiculous that she’s behaving like someone who was forced into it. Starting with all those murdered models, and finishing with any woman who’s been assaulted. She wasn’t assaulted. Well, she was. Technically. But she went into it with her eyes wide open. It’s not the same, and she doesn’t feel she has cause to be spooking. People who’ve not actually voluntarily assumed the risk have the right to any reaction they exhibit: there is no right or wrong response then.

She nuzzles back into Castle’s neck, and tries a tentative nibble. He makes a pleased noise, and leans a little so she can nibble a wider area. She doesn’t. She nibbles his ear instead. There is a slight jerk of the arms around her, which briefly tighten and then relax. Up to her. She has to take the lead. That’s the deal.

“Kiss me again,” she breathes into his ear. “Like you mean it. Like it should be. And this time I want you to keep rounding the bases till I say stop.”

“Promise I will.” Another breath. “Kiss me. Touch me. Remind me how we ought to be.” Help me get back to where we want to be.

“You said you’d do whatever I wanted. I want this. If I need to stop you I will.” She breathes.

“Stop if I ask you,” Castle insists. This could be okay. But it could be appalling. He’s not at all sure this is a good plan, but it’s for Beckett to take her own decisions and run her own life.

It’s also not exactly what he’d offered. He’d offered her his total acquiescence to her total control. She’s mutated that to simply stop if I ask you, which he would have done any time, any place,
anywhere.

But this is her decision. Not his. So he does what she’s asked, and kisses her.

With his own particular twist on affairs. He’ll kiss her like he means it, touch her like he wants to, love her till it’s all better or she says stop – but that will be just as effective without any edge of force or anger. This will be soft and teasing and slow. It will be nothing like the shoot. It will be loving.

He cups her face and turns her head to his and gently tastes her lips, tickling at the seam and flirting with entrance, nibbling softly and always lightly teasing. She opens, and teases lightly on her own account, and gradually both of them turn it deeper, closer, harder: he runs a hand into her hair and carefully angles her head so that they both have full access. He kisses her like he means it, like she wanted, like she wants – like she loves.

He teases and tastes until she’s welcoming him in: only then moving his other hand to slip around her waist, move further, slide upward: slowly, slowly; so that she can stop him at any time. She isn’t saying Stop, but she’s fractionally tense. Her fingers move and knot in his shirt: clinging to him, not pushing away, nor yet opening up. She’s still kissing him, playing with his mouth as he has with hers: kissing him like she means it.

He shifts his hand a little further, slow and sensual, to meet the soft curve of the underside of her breast, and lightly cups it. There is a soft, almost satisfied breath, and she moves fractionally so that a little more is accessible. He is suddenly aware that the fingers fisted in his shirt are close enough to the centre to unbutton it, and more, that they are. Not far, not fully, but the pads are touching skin and then sliding inside to rest against the flesh of his shoulders. They’re almost flirting, almost teasing, and the fractional tension has dissipated.

Time for a more overt move. He turns the kiss much harder, deeper, more openly sexual than flirtatious: a kiss that now says let’s take this a lot further. Her grip tightens. His hand moves, and his thumb brushes tantalisingly over her nipple. She sighs – and suddenly invades his mouth, and everything lights up in one fiery instant, as if her Rubicon has been crossed. She strips open his buttons and takes his mouth and she’s leading: it’s as hard and hot as Thursday’s second round as she moves from his mouth to his neck and nips and he shivers and growls and his thumb sweeps over her nipple until he realises that he is shirtless and she is not.

The way she’s playing with him: feathering his pecs and nipples and swooping teasingly lower; the way she’s firing him up so that every touch of her wickedly confident, evil hands stokes him higher; the way that his shirt is now a floor rug and – how did that happen? – his belt is undone: she’s back to his confident, commanding, badass Beckett and she is so fucking hot that he’s already scalded.

He pulls off her top and, incredibly, she murmurs what took you so long in a sexed-up purr which is entirely unfair when he’s been so careful with her till now. But it’s worked. She’d been right: she’d known what she needed to do.

When Castle’s slow, careful seduction of her mouth finally turns into a slow, careful move of his hands, for a brief moment Beckett wonders if she’s taking the right route to solve this. If this doesn’t work, it’ll be the department-approved shrink, which is not what she wants. She grips on the fabric of his shirt, and kisses him: all that she’d like to say in the kiss.

And somehow that trips her switch. This is Castle. Not some leering, pawing lowlife. Not some psycho serial killer or his sidekick. This is Castle, and she loves him.
She slips her fingers delicately over two buttons: enough to let her hands inside the shirt, to touch smooth skin over nicely firm muscles. Strong enough to hand her all control, but now it’s time to even matters up. She teases over his skin, and he takes the hint and turns his mouth harder, more demanding; she takes a firmer grip on his shoulders and pulls him to her, or tries to: he doesn’t exactly move, which is unbelievably reassuring. Strong enough. Always enough.

And then he makes a very definitely sexual move and takes full, passionate possession of her mouth and flicks a touch across her nipple and that’s enough: she explodes and takes his mouth back again, whips his buttons open and his shirt off and nips his neck where he’ll want it most and he’s playing with her and she turns it up another notch and everything is right: it’s worked; he’s done it for her and there’s nothing more to stop them and she slips hands down and across and over and the belt is just a nuisance and then her top flies off and what took you so long? she purrs naughtily into his ear and he growls because she knows that’s just unfair when she’s the one who had to lead and bring them here at her pace.

One elegantly erotic hand slides inside his pants and finds what she’s looking for. Oh yes: exactly what she’s looking for, and he’s as hot as she is. An unnoticed worry: that he’d respect or want her less because of the shoot, disappears as silently as it had slithered into her subconscious.

His hands slide down over her waist: heat running ahead of them and pooling in her centre; she’s leaning back, opened up to him so he can continue with his wicked attention to her breasts: hands stroking and cupping; mouth following.

“Take me to bed, Castle,” she murmurs.

And he does. Stands up, leaves his pants behind with all the other clothes they’ve removed, sweeps her up and takes her to bed. He doesn’t lose contact with her; doesn’t wait and admire or watch her; but lays her down and joins her there and leans over and kisses her again.
Stories like ours

Mysteriously, her jeans have departed. Less mysteriously, Castle is caressing her thigh. It’s intensely erotic, and he’s barely approached the silky sensitivity of the inner face. He rolls slightly and they’re face to face; lying on their sides. Her leg comes up around his hip to hold herself to the hard bulge that is right where she likes it; pressing in and running her hand down over his back and across his ass and pushing at his leg so that one thick thigh is between her legs and she can take delicious friction from it. He’s still, subtly, letting her set the pace and take the lead.

She rolls him to flat on his back and wriggles to be spread over him: nibbles mischievously at his ear so that he yips and grabs for her and runs his hand between them and between her legs and shifts the fabric of her panties so that it rubs over her and then slides a thick, hard finger under the material to tease through soaked flesh and dance over tight-coiled nerves and she can’t think about anything but his gorgeously talented fingers slipping and sliding, flickering in and out; foretaste of later actions and she kisses him desperately, violently; her hands frantically clenching on his wide shoulders; his hard weight there, ready, awaiting invitation.

He undoes her bra, one-handed; she releases him for long enough for it to be stripped away, then shoves at his boxers as he tugs at her panties and both are kicked off to leave them naked. She’s touching him now: palming and surrounding and sliding; playing with silky skin and feathering over the head, spreading the drop of liquid over him, and it’s all too much for him just as she’d intended and he flips them and spreads her and settles between her legs and over her and slides once, twice through slicked wet folds and she takes him fully in hand and leads him where she wants him, where he should be.

And then he thrusts hard home and she cries out in welcome and he’s there within her and it’s perfectly, totally right. He is totally, perfectly right.

Afterwards, she snuggles into his side, and wraps an arm around him, and nuzzles her nose into the space behind his ear where the hair is short and soft and smells of his products and him; and feels safe.

“You okay?”

“Yeah. Just needed time.” She pauses. “It wasn’t like being attacked.” Castle makes a strangulated noise. “I mean, I put myself out there to catch them. It was an operation. So it’s just another day on the job. It’s not like I wasn’t protected. You all had my back. If it had been a different… situation… not an op… then it might have been different. But I signed up for this.” She pauses again. “We got them,” she says ferociously. “We got them.”

“I got you,” Castle says happily. This is true. He’s cossetting her closely.

“They’ll never see daylight again,” she adds, without really hearing him. “Never. And they didn’t break me, either. Because I chose to go in there and do it.” Her voice turns remote and sad and somehow scared. “If I’d been like the other girls, if I’d not known what I was doing and what was going to happen, I’d be another corpse. Just like Daniela, and Melinda, and Carissà, and Angelita.” She breathes. “They never had a hope. Doped, raped and murdered.”

There is a melancholy silence.

“But you weren’t, and you got them, and they’ll never do it again, and let’s not think about it any more.
“It’s done.”

“Yes,” she says, and curls in a little more. “All done.” She’s quiet for a span. “And at least the Feds are gone, too.”

“Don’t you like them?”

“Nope.”

“But Beckett, they had all the cool toys!”

“I didn’t notice you volunteering for the tracker injection.”

“No.”

“It hurt. No more trackers.”

“I could kiss it better,” Castle says lazily, without actually doing anything about it.

Beckett makes a cynical noise. “That doesn’t work.”

“Aw,” he says annoyingly, “you mean that Disney Princess band-aids and a kiss don’t make everything better?”

“Not when you’re over the age of eight.”

“Really? Kisses seem to make lots of things better when you’re over eight. I always find that kisses make everything better.” He smiles, rakishly. “Obviously you need some more experience.”

She grumbles into his neck. He rolls over to face her and drops a tiny kiss on her nose, which scrunches cutely. He is not stupid enough to say so. Beckett thinks she doesn’t do cute – even when she does. Safest not to point it out. “See, better,” he says instead.

“The tracker was in my arm,” she notes.

Castle finds the relevant arm, still draped over him, examines it, and kisses the vicinity of the wound. “Better,” he states.

Beckett rolls her eyes.

“Isn’t it?”

She doesn’t answer. Medically, it’s completely useless. As a morale booster, it has potential, or possibly a placebo effect.

“It is,” he emits very smugly, and kisses her arm again. This kiss is on the upper side of the wound, much closer to her shoulder. Strangely, a third kiss arrives on the point of her shoulder, and then one on her neck, and her cheek, and a naughty little nibble by her ear, by which time any pain in her arm is entirely blotted out by the heat flooding down her nerves. Except he’s stopped, and his hands aren’t doing anything interesting, so to speak, and that is – oh. Oh. *She* knows it’s okay now. *He* might not.

“Come here,” she purrs. “It’s all fine now.” She shifts her hand down and mischievously pinches his butt.
He squeaks indignantly. “Oh, Beckett, you’ve done it now,” he threatens, and retaliates by tickling her completely unfairly around the middle so that she’s the one squeaking and squirming and trying to tickle him and failing: and then suddenly he’s looming up over her and descending to kiss her and then everything is sensation and sensuality and simply them.

“All better,” she murmurs, a little later, curled against him again, and drifts into sleep.

Castle cuddles up to her, slings a gently possessive arm over her waist, and enjoys the snuggled up closeness. Shortly, he too is asleep.

In the morning, coffee has been had, breakfast has not existed in Beckett’s minimalist fridge contents, and she is fretting and fussing to get out and go to the flea market and buy her table and chairs. Castle is as quick as he can be, but nothing short of faster-than-light warp speed would have satisfied her.

Her tour round the market is more of a double-time route march, too. She has a goal in mind, obviously, and anything that doesn’t serve her purpose is ignored. Castle wouldn’t have minded some closer looks, but she’s enthusiastic and that’s worth a lot. He’ll suggest a slow meander when she’s found what she wants, with a stop for some breakfast. He’s hungry. Beckett, however, is as impervious to bodily needs while stalking furniture as she is when hunting down a killer.

Suddenly she swoops off and pounces on a clean-lined pine table, Shaker style. Lurking in the same space are six chairs.

“I like this one,” she says definitively, and embarks on a feisty negotiation over the price, demanding a discount because she’ll take the lot. Some time later, she’s got the vendor down by more than they wanted and less than she did, which is pretty much the definition of compromise. Castle smiles fondly (and secretly) at the sight of Beckett compromising, and doesn’t say a single word. He is much more surprised when she pays, and instead of slowing down, marches off round another range of stalls. Another half hour later, she’s intimidated two more vendors into discounting an elegant table lamp and a slim pine coffee table.

“Beckett,” Castle says plaintively, “I’m hungry, and you must need coffee by now. Can’t we stop and get some?”

Beckett stops, at his hand on her arm, and blinks at the interruption to her crusade.

“You’ve got your table, chairs, a coffee table, and even a lamp. Can’t we just – um – take stock for a minute?”

It looks as if she’s considering it. “Okay,” she says, and leads off to the café. Castle just about manages to pay for the victuals in the face of Beckett’s focus. As soon as they’re seated, she finds a pen and paper in her purse and scrawls some numbers down, totals them, subtracts that from another number and grimaces at the result. She puts it all away and sips her coffee, scowling into space.

“What’s up?”

“I wanted to get a small table to put the lamp on,” she says, dispirited, “but I don’t think I’m going to find one.”

Castle accurately translates this to mean I haven’t enough money, and doesn’t stop to think.

“Let me.” It jumps from his mouth.
Her glance sears him.

“No, let me. If you find one. Housewarming present. Or we can go halves, if it’s expensive.” He assumes a pitiful mien. “I can’t afford your costly tastes, Detective. If I tried to match the style and elegance of your desk in the bullpen,” he says over her horrified splutter, “I’d be destitute.”

“Devoid of intelligence, maybe,” she snarks. “You call that taste?”

Castle grins. “To a certain sort of Brutalist designer, maybe. I don’t like it. And my chair is almost as uncomfortable as those ones Selwyn had – though I grant you that it doesn’t have the same elegance.”

Beckett snorts. “Okay, your membership of the Tasteful Designers Guild is on the way.”

“So can I buy you a small table? Just a tiny one? Pleeeeeease?”

“I’ll think about it. Maybe.” Which is a capitulation he had not expected.

He bounces in his chair. “Now I’ll have somewhere to put my coffee cup,” he chirps. “I won’t risk kicking it over when you’re overcome by my rugged handsomeness.”

Beckett chokes on the last mouthful of her coffee and is not rescued by Castle’s frantic back-patting. By the time she’s finished wheezing and coughing and spluttering she’s red-faced and tearful. Through her choking she’s trying to exhale imprecations at his arrogance, at which she is failing miserably, not for want of effort.

“If you stopped trying to insult me you’d recover faster,” Castle points out, which really doesn’t improve matters. On the other hand, it is (as planned) distracting Beckett from his offer to buy her a table. She glares blackly at him, utterly spoilt by the effects of her choking. With considerable difficulty, Castle preserves a straight face.

Once Beckett has recovered breath, they perambulate much more slowly around the spaces of the market. Finally, a table that satisfies all of Beckett’s views on interior décor, her views on price, and Castle’s views, which according to Beckett are not relevant because she is not letting him spend that much money on her (he doesn’t agree), is alighted upon.

Everything is collated, collected, loaded and finally arrives at Beckett’s apartment to be arranged in an acceptable fashion. Strangely, it’s Castle who insists on micrometric precision of placement. Beckett displays much more of a that-will-do attitude. However, the new lamp is glowing gently (even if it is the middle of the day Castle insisted on switching it on) on the small table, and their coffee mugs are sitting proudly on the larger one.

“I can have a housewarming now,” Beckett says contentedly. “Room for everyone to sit down.”

She switches the lamp off, and looks around. Her photos are hanging on the walls, and the sun is streaming in. With her new furniture and the photos, it looks more lived in, and more like her home. Still much to do, but for almost the first time since moving in, she doesn’t feel a sense of something missing when she gazes round. Of course, that might be because the major previously missing item is sitting comfortably on her couch.

“It looks good,” Castle says.

“Yeah.”

“Um, look, er… I gotta go home, but, er…”
Beckett regards him very suspiciously. “Spit it out.”

“Would you come for dinner tonight? At the loft?”

She boggles. “Why?”

“I can cook?”

“Real reason.”


Beckett’s bogglement doubles. “You what now?” she gulps.

“She says she wants you to come back to the loft, so she can behave properly.” He swallows. “I think she means it.” And swallows again. “But I got it so wrong last time that I can’t promise I’m right.” He looks pathetically at her. “But I want you to. To let her try? Please?”

“And if she doesn’t mean it?” Beckett asks, striking straight at the heart of the problem. There is a long, chill pause. Castle slumps.

“I don’t know. Tell her what you think, if you can get in ahead of Mother. Walk out. I don’t know. If it’s all gone that wrong then I don’t know what happens,” he says heavily. “It’s never been like this before.”

Beckett says nothing. There is nothing to say, if it’s all a way to manufacture trouble.

“But if it is,” Castle suddenly says harshly, “it doesn’t change this. It’s my decision who I date.” He slumps again. “I just want it to be like it was.”

Uncomfortable, chilly silence continues for a moment. Beckett doesn’t pick him up on saying that he’s dating her. It seems like the best description, for now.

“Okay,” Beckett says briskly. “I’ll come. Might as well find out where we stand.” Her confident tones are not in any way matched by the sinking feeling in her stomach. Alexis’s previous behaviour coupled with her professional cynicism and distrust of expressed motivations are not inclining her to believe that dinner will be successful. Castle isn’t even trying to disguise his worry.

“You will?”

“Yeah.”

At six p.m. Beckett is regretting her decision to accept dinner, as she walks up to Castle’s door and knocks. She is greeted by a red-topped tornado.

“I didn’t believe you’d come and I’m so sorry and I can’t believe you’re here and I wish I’d never done any of it and” –

“Alexis, how about you let Detective Beckett get in the door?”

With some relief, and thankful for a chance to catch her breath, Beckett comes inside the loft. Castle sweeps her up and out of Alexis’s way, which is welcome since Alexis is drawing breath to fuel, no doubt, another round of machine-gun mea culpas.

“D’you want a drink? Red?”
“Sure, thanks.”

Castle produces a very large glass of red, which is, as expected, excellent. While Beckett is divesting herself of her light jacket and putting her purse down, Castle whispers a few words to Alexis which have the effect of stemming her incoherent flow of apologies and reducing her to relative quiet. He packs her off to do things in the kitchen, and ambles over to where Beckett is ensconced on the couch.

“I meant to open the door,” he says, “but I was beaten to the punch.”

“Okay. I brought some chocolates,” she says, rummaging in her capacious purse.

“Yum. We can have them after dinner.”

Conversation dies, uncomfortably, both of them aware of Alexis’s embarrassed presence. “Um…Let’s have dinner,” Castle eventually says, and the three of them sit down to a chicken salad. Eating manages to disguise the lack of anything more than the most trivial conversation. They might all have been English, since all they talk about is the weather, stiltedly.

Dessert does not improve the quality of conversation. Alexis is embarrassed and trying too hard to prove that she really does want to mend matters; so Beckett is hard pressed – and embarrassed – to keep reassuring her that it’s in the past rather than yell yes you screwed up now can you just get over yourself at her, which won’t help anything. Castle has buried his nose in his wine after a few efforts to move conversation away from the weather crashed and sank on the rock of the unspoken issue.

Finally Beckett takes the lack of conversation by the scruff of the metaphorical neck.

“Okay. Alexis, you’ve apologised enough. You were really dumb but you’ve owned up to your mistakes. No, I’m not impressed by what you did. I thought you were smarter than that, but we’ve all done plenty of dumb stuff when we were sixteen and you had the guts to make it right so I’m not going to hold it against you in any way. Let’s put it behind us and move on.”

Alexis gapes at her. Castle squeaks, and quickly shuts his mouth as his ears turn pink.

“But” –

“No. It’s done. I don’t want to hear about it any more. You say that you’re sorry, well, show that you’re sorry by never talking about it again.”

“But” – Alexis starts again.

“Any more of this is self-indulgent. You’re creating a drama where you don’t need to.” Beckett pauses, and delivers the killing blow to teen insanity as Alexis opens her mouth. “Just like you did with me staying here.”

Alexis shuts her mouth, very fast, cheeks blazing scarlet to match her hair. Castle winces. That was harsh.

Unfortunately, it was also fair. Alexis has been making considerable drama out of her contrition and unhappiness, and had looked set to continue. It looks very like that’s been stopped dead, and while Beckett had landed on it hard, she had first told Alexis that it was all forgiven. Well, that’s more or less what she meant. Otherwise she wouldn’t be here.

Alexis, on the other hand, shortly isn’t here.
“Excuse me, Dad, Detective Beckett,” she emits, and decamps for her room, her flaming face lighting her way.

The two adults exchange glances.

“Coffee?”

“Yes please.”

“Chocolate?”

“Definitely.”

The first chocolates, and the second, disappear at near light speed. They look at each other a little sheepishly as their fingers clash over a third chocolate each.

“Um, you first.” Castle’s fingers retreat.

“I brought them for you.” Beckett’s fingers reluctantly slide backwards. “You first.”

“I don’t need too many sweets. I’m sweet enough.” She snorts. He smirks, and removes the chocolates from her reach. She squawks. He replaces them with himself, sliding across the couch and snuggling her in. “See?” He kisses her, gently, on the cheek. She regards him indignantly.

“What was that?”

“A kiss. Surely you know what that is by now?” His brows waggle in a very salacious fashion. Beckett colours delicately. His voice drops into a soft, insinuatingly velvet baritone. “After all, I’ve kissed you nearly everywhere.” The colour is no longer delicate. “But I wouldn’t want to send my daughter into therapy.”

“Beyond what she needs from growing up with you?” Beckett snarks.

Castle laughs, not in the slightest offended. “I’ve already put a fund aside for that, as well as her college fund. Though I do think that you should worry about the effect of my mother, not me.”

Beckett’s high colour retreats. “Anyway, it’s all fixed. That’s what we wanted. Guess I should go home now.” She smirks. “Seeing as you’re preserving the proprieties.”

“I love when you alliterate.” Castle frowns at her. “I don’t love that you’re going home.”

“Yeah. Well. It’s as fixed as it can be, and I don’t wanna push our luck.” Her face brightens. “But I’m going to have a housewarming. This week, if I can get everyone over. The boys, Lanie, O’Leary. And you.” She smiles very seductively. “We could have a sleepover.”

“All of us?” Castle asks mischievously.


“Till tomorrow, Beckett.” But he walks her to the door and then kisses her so deeply that she nearly stays, just so he wouldn’t stop.
Beckett surveys her apartment with some pride. It’s amazing what a couple of tables and the photos have done to improve matters. She’d bitten the bullet, gone out to a discount store, managed some nice wine glasses and even put a vase of flowers on the table. The fridge is full of beer and pizza as well as some wine; there is soda in the unlikely event anyone doesn’t want liquor, and there are many cartons of ice-cream in the freezer. She knows her friends’ tastes inside out. As she looks round again, the first knock on the door arrives.

It’s Ryan and Esposito. They arrive inside, and stare around.

“Spacious,” Ryan says. Espo looks as if he would say *Spartan*, if only he knew the word. Neither of them have brought anything with them, not even a bottle of beer or wine. Or soda. Or even a card. Beckett reminds herself firmly that expecting presents – even a small housewarming tea light – is spoilt and grabby, and gets them each a beer. While she’s doing that, the door sounds again: with Lanie’s cheerfully lecherous grin on the other side. She bounces in, and examines the apartment.

“Still a bit bare, girlfriend.” She stops, abruptly, on Beckett’s glare. “But classy,” she adds rapidly.

“Want some wine, or beer?”

“Wine, please. You having some too?”

“Yep.” Beckett efficiently opens and pours the wine. She is more than a touch disappointed that Lanie also came empty-handed. However, good company is always a good thing to have. Ryan is peering out of the windows, and jumps when she speaks.

“Nice view.”

“Yes.” She turns round, and surprises Espo whispering in Lanie’s ear. They leap apart when they notice her. She smirks evilly. “Don’t mind me. You can go make out in the corner there.” Both of them glare at her.

For the next twenty minutes, every time Beckett turns round to talk to one of her friends the other two start whispering behind her. Honestly, it’s like being a schoolmarm. She is unutterably relieved when the door sounds. She hopes that’ll be Castle, whose tardiness is also a tad disappointing. She’d have thought he’d be here early, but he’s almost half an hour late. O’Leary is more understandable: Central Park on a Friday can be a little lively.

She wanders over to the door and finds it full of the O’Leary mountain range.

“Hey,” he rumbles, and looks straight past her at the boys. “Need you guys,” he says. Ryan and Esposito dash for the door, almost knocking Beckett down in their hurry.

“What?” she says. “Where are you going?”

“Need them,” O’Leary says again, and all three men disappear.

Beckett looks at her open door, looks at her wine glass, and downs the contents in one. “I thought we were having a party?” she says to Lanie, as she shoves the door shut.

“Men,” Lanie shrugs. “Have another drink.”
Beckett thinks that’s a good plan. A *hell* of a good plan. “They’re all rats. And Castle hasn’t even showed up.” The renewed wine level drops noticeably.

“I’m sure they’ll have a good reason.”

“They better. Or Ryan and Espo will spend a month investigating Dumpsters. Castle can help them.”

At which point there is a loud banging on the door. Beckett stalks over to it and flings it open – and gawps. “Uh?” she emits.

“Out of the way, Beckett!” Espo orders. Stunned, she shifts. The – oh my, *four* – men march themselves in, carrying – she is utterly dumbfounded – a second, matching, small table and lamp; a set of pine bookshelves with the same simple, clean lines and style as the tables she had bought on Sunday, with two large boxes delicately balanced on them; and a covered roll.

Castle, bringing up the rear with the roll of something unknown, grins at her. “Sorry I’m late. Traffic was bad. We got a bit stuck.”

“Uh?” Beckett says, speechless and brainless.

“We all got together,” Ryan explains. “The four of us and Lanie. Castle went bargain hunting and we all chipped in for your housewarming gift.”

Beckett falls on to her couch. “Thank you,” she manages, and buries her over-emotional face in her wine.

“C’mon, we need to put these in place.”

The table and lamp arrive at the other end of the couch. The small pathetic pile of books is moved, and the bookshelves inserted. The pile becomes shelved.

“Looks a bit empty,” O’Leary notes, grinning widely.

They open the two boxes, and fill the bookshelves. Beckett can only stare, left wholly wordless and very close to tears at their actions.

“Lift your glass up,” Castle tells her, kneeling over the roll. She does. O’Leary and Espo lift the coffee table, and, in best Arabian Nights style, Castle unrolls a warm-toned, golden shaded rug. It has a border of elephants, linked trunk to tail, all the way around.

“It’s gorgeous.” Her voice cracks. “I can’t believe it. You shouldn’t… it’s too much. You…”

They all look at her as if she’s crazy. “You’d’a done it for us,” Espo points out. “In fact, I think you did. Didn’t you get Lanie a set of bookshelves when she moved?”

“You got me stuff,” Ryan adds. “Okay, so I never used the tablecloth” –

“Yeah you did,” Espo contradicts. “Christmas time.”

“Okay, anyhow, you did. You got me a load of stuff when I moved in.”

“Iffen you don’t like the rug, I want it. It’s got *elephants*.” As if she hadn’t noticed, O’Leary.

“My elephants,” she says very possessively. “It’s perfect. Thank you.” She sniffs. “Beer? Pizza? Wine? We need to celebrate.” She moves to the fridge. Opening it hides the fact that she is close to
crying with happiness.

Castle sneaks up behind her. “You okay?” he murmurs. “You’re not mad at us?”

“Mad? No. No way. They’re… it’s great. You – I know this was all your idea – it’s perfect.” She sniffs again, and hands him four bottles of beer. “I’ll put the pizzas on, if you share the beer out?”

Castle doesn’t mention that putting pizza on will give her time to recover her composure. Hidden by the open fridge door, he briefly runs a hand over her back. She curves a little into it, but she still sounds a little shaken, a lot emotional. If they were alone, he’d cuddle her in, and hold her close (and definitely not tell her that he’d insisted on paying for almost all of the housewarming gifts, over considerable disagreement from the others, on the grounds that it’s perfectly proportionate to the success of Nikki Heat and the relative incomes of the five of them) and kiss her all happy again. But they’re not. Still, the door is hiding them both…

He pinches her ass.

“What the hell?” she hisses.

“That’s better. Now you’re cross with me, not sniffing.” He smiles beautifully and raises his voice slightly. “I like pepperoni pizza. Tell me you got lots with pepperoni, Beckett?”

“Nope. They’ve all got pineapple.”


“Enough. Of course I got something you like. I got something everyone likes.”

“You – you played me!”

“You’re so easy.”

“You’ll find out just how easy I’m not later on,” he purrs dangerously. Beckett lifts an eyebrow. Castle smiles lazily, and takes advantage of the fridge door to stroke her ass again, stopping less than one inch shy of utterly obscene. She glares. Castle smirks smugly and wanders off with the four beers, locating the opener on the counter and distributing the beer to the counterpoint of Beckett’s familiar irritation at being unable to get the last word.

As the beer level fluctuates and the pizza mountain is whittled down (mostly by O’Leary, who has an unfair advantage in both reach and appetite), the tone of discussion becomes more bantering and sillier. Currently the game is Let’s suggest décor for this apartment.

“I’d have crossed rifles between the windows,” Espo (naturally) offers. “Polished, an’ workin’, a’course.”

“No way.”


“Nah. Wouldn’t go with the couch,” O’Leary notes. “But I did see some four-foot wooden elephants in some craft shop, an’ since wooden elephants ain’t edible” – everyone sniggers – “you could get one an’ put it right there.” He points. Everyone follows his gesture.
“Wow. I can just see that.”

“It would be great,” Castle says enthusiastically, dreaming of a polished teak elephant.

“I guess you could hang your coat on the trunk.” Ryan ruins the mood. Everyone glares at him.

“Not this month,” Beckett says. O’Leary’s enormous frame droops. “But next month’s paycheque, now all of you’ve got me the things I was planning on getting, might work.” O’Leary perks up again.

Lanie decides to get in on the act. “If you’ve got some spare cash next month, you and me can go shopping.” Beckett cowers. “Yep. I found this little patch of stores with all sorts of pretty things. You need some pretty things.”

“Lanie, you are the world’s most chi-chi ME ever. Your apartment is full of samplers and embroidered cushions” –

“Don’t you diss my embroidery, girl. You do that and I won’t give you any.” Beckett does not look notably frightened by this thought. “Anyway, you need some pretty things.”

“I’ll have the elephant.”

“She got us. We’re pretty things.” Everyone howls with laughter at Esposito’s statement.

“Pretty? You?”

“I’m ruggedly handsome,” Castle preens. There’s another collective howl of laughter. He pouts. No-one sympathises.

“Okay, everyone. Lanie, it’s sweet, but I don’t do collections of tea lights and porcelain thimbles.”

“You should,” Lanie mutters sotto voce. O’Leary snorts.

“But the elephant sounds good so if O’Leary tells us where the store is, we’ll go buy it. ‘Kay?”

Lanie grumbles something which sounds like tea lights. Beckett calmly ignores it. She doesn’t do chi-chi, or frou-frou, or bric-a-brac. Nice clean lines, and plenty of space. And no tea lights. On the other hand, a couple of thick, heavy scented candles would be good. She’ll tell Lanie that on the day. It’ll be a nice surprise for her.

She smiles widely round her friends, and raises her wine glass. “To good friends,” she toasts. “Thank you all.”

“Friends,” arrives back at her.

“An’ elephants.” O’Leary’s megalith-tall grin carries everyone along, and the evening dissolves into more pizza, and more drink, and more jokes and stories and ragging.

Eventually the party breaks up. Well. Lanie grumps horribly about being on duty tomorrow, and reluctantly leaves, still muttering about tea lights and embroidered tablecloths and lots of scatter cushions but fortunately unable to see Beckett’s affectionate eye-roll behind her head. Espo and Ryan follow her, and then there were three.

Just like there had been three when the whole mess of the case and unravelling of emotions had really begun. This time, however, everyone’s on easy terms. O’Leary regards Castle with a benevolent and I’m-Beckett’s-big-brotherly eye.
“Now see? Iffen I hadn’t happened along, you’d still’ve been mis’r’ble. Ain’t you lucky I’m your pal?” He grins happily. “I tol’ you you should kiss ‘n’ make up. An’ you did. Awww.”

“Just for that, we should take your beer away.”

O’Leary grabs it and hugs it protectively. “Don’t you do that, butterfly.” He regards them rather inquisitively, like the world’s largest curious hamster, nose twitching slightly. “I’d’a thought you’d be all snuggled up, now the others are gone. Not like they haven’t guessed, but I guess you don’t wanna frighten the horses.”

Castle flicks a glance at Beckett. O’Leary watches both of them. Much to his interest, Castle doesn’t do anything except wait. Bit surprisin’, that, considerin’ how Castle’d been like a dog with a bone.

Or mebbe – not.

O’Leary hasn’t seen the photos or the tapes. He’s no wish to, an’ it’s not his business either. But he hasn’t forgotten the scene in the warehouse, or the two hours of hell before, during and afterward. He likes his pals alive. Ghosts ain’t no good.

He continues to watch blandly as Beckett is the one who makes the move, reaching out to twine fingers. It’s only after that, that Castle slings an arm round her. He’d not put Castle down as shy to take what he wanted, but that’s definitely him waitin’ for Beckett. Hmmm. A good guy, Castle. A very good guy indeed. Takes a strong man to hold back like that.

“Waaaallll, time for me t’ go.” He downs the rest of his beer in one gulp. “Been a good party. Next time, I wanna see that elephant in the corner there.”

“So long as you don’t steal it.”

“Told you, it ain’t edible. I don’t want it iffen I can’t cook it.”

He unfolds, stretches, just misses the ceiling light – thank the Lord for high ceilings – and pats Beckett on the head because it’s always made her cross. She growls.

“Time I went.”

Beckett stands up, out of Castle’s arm. “Night, O’Leary. Thanks.” She hugs him, and he envelops her, briefly.

“Now, you take care of my pal Castle. An’ you, you take care of Beckett here. An’ if I get to hear of any trouble, I’ll be back to sort you out again.”

By the time he’s finished, Castle’s reached them, and bumps fists with the mobile matchmaking mountain.


“Night,” they say in unison, and he beams beatifically at them both, and ambles off.

“What’ll we do now?”

“Tidy up,” Beckett says, at which Castle’s face collapses comically. “C’mon. I’ll wash, you dry, and we’ll be done in ten minutes.” She develops a small, secretive smile. “Then…we’ll see.”

In fact, with two of them, tidying up takes less than ten minutes, even when the recycling is taken
to the chute. Castle slips back in and shuts the door just as Beckett puts the last plate away, and slings an arm around her as she turns around.

“You waited, earlier.”

“Didn’t want you to spook in front of O’Leary.”

She wriggles, uncomfortably. “Wouldn’t have.” Most likely she wouldn’t have. But he wasn’t willing to take that chance. “You’ve… look, don’t treat me like I’m broken. Do what you want to do.”

“Do what I want to do?”

She nods.

He takes her mouth with all the passion and force that he’s wanted to use since moment one, a year and more ago: diving full in and sweeping her along on the roaring tsunami of his desire, her want swelling the wave that breaks and drowns them in each other. He takes and owns and conquers: she gives back as hard, as passionately and adds a small, erotic nip to his lower lip which he returns, and it’s harder, rougher: claiming and owning and wholly possessive.

She slows, not spooking but calming, as if she has the right to explore and tease and touch and taste (she does: oh God she does); slowing their frenetic pace to smoother, more seductive and less ravaging. He follows her lead, for now, for a moment, but there’s still no hitch or hesitation in her actions and so he takes the lead again, angling her head and kissing her hard; a hand dropping to her ass to press her in against him, to curl around one thigh and lift her leg around his waist so she’s open over his hard erection: he holds her there and she rolls as he grinds and she’s perfectly placed and poised and sized to him.

He tugs again and she’s tight against hard weight and firm length, right where she needs him: trying frantically to find the frictions he wants while he’s duelling with her tongue: she’s got a hand around the base of his skull to keep him on her mouth; pushing hard nipples against his chest through the clothes they’re still wearing though she’s so close, right there: he’s pressing so hard and she needs him in her right here right now. Her hand opens belt and zipper, strokes and palms him and he emits an animal noise and plunges his own hand down to open her up and sweep through soaked hot folds and entire tight flesh and shove her pants and panties away and off and lift her and bring her down on him and it’s exactly, totally what she wants and needs and he rubs one hard stroke of his thumb across her and she clenches and shrieks and he thrusts into her and they’re both gone, that fast.

“Bed,” he rasps, and simply carries her there, she still wrapped around him. He places her on the bed, still in her shirt and bra but nothing else; he’s still fully dressed. He strips, desperate to be naked with her, skin to skin and nothing to stop them. And then he stops, and slows himself down: lies on the bed propped up on an elbow and looks down at her: swollen lipped, eyes sleepy; his hot gaze watching every little tell and flicker of movement.

“Kiss me,” she whispers.

“In a moment.”

He opens her shirt, spreading it apart and revealing the beauty below: sits her up and slips it off and away; flicks her bra clasp open and discards that too, leaving her as naked as he. He sweeps a long, admiring gaze across her, and follows it with a delicate line from a broad finger, which makes her wriggle.
“Mine,” he rasps, and runs the finger back up to under her chin. “You’re gorgeous.”

She reaches up to him, and cups his face softly. “Castle,” she murmurs. “My Castle.”

And then she pulls him down over her and there is no more talking.

Later, she’s curled up over him with an arm around his chest; his arms firmly wound around her, petting idly, without intent. She plays with a wisp of soft hair behind his ear; he draws tiny squiggles on her shoulder-blades and back. It’s all very contented and peaceful.

Beckett snuggles closer. “I wish…” she mumbles, and trails off.

“Me too.” He doesn’t expand: it’s not required. “But we’re here now.”

“Yes.” She cuddles him closer, and hums in a small, satisfied way. “Mine.”

“No games, just us.”

“Mmmm.” She runs her fingers along his now-shadowed jaw. “No games? No playing with you? I like playing with you.” She demonstrates, the finger slinking along his lips. He draws it in, and nips lightly. His own hands move more intently. She presses a kiss to his neck, and he draws her up.

“As long as you only play with me.” He moves, and she slips down to take him in. “Just like that.” He waits a beat.

“No flags on these plays, Beckett.”

Fin.

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